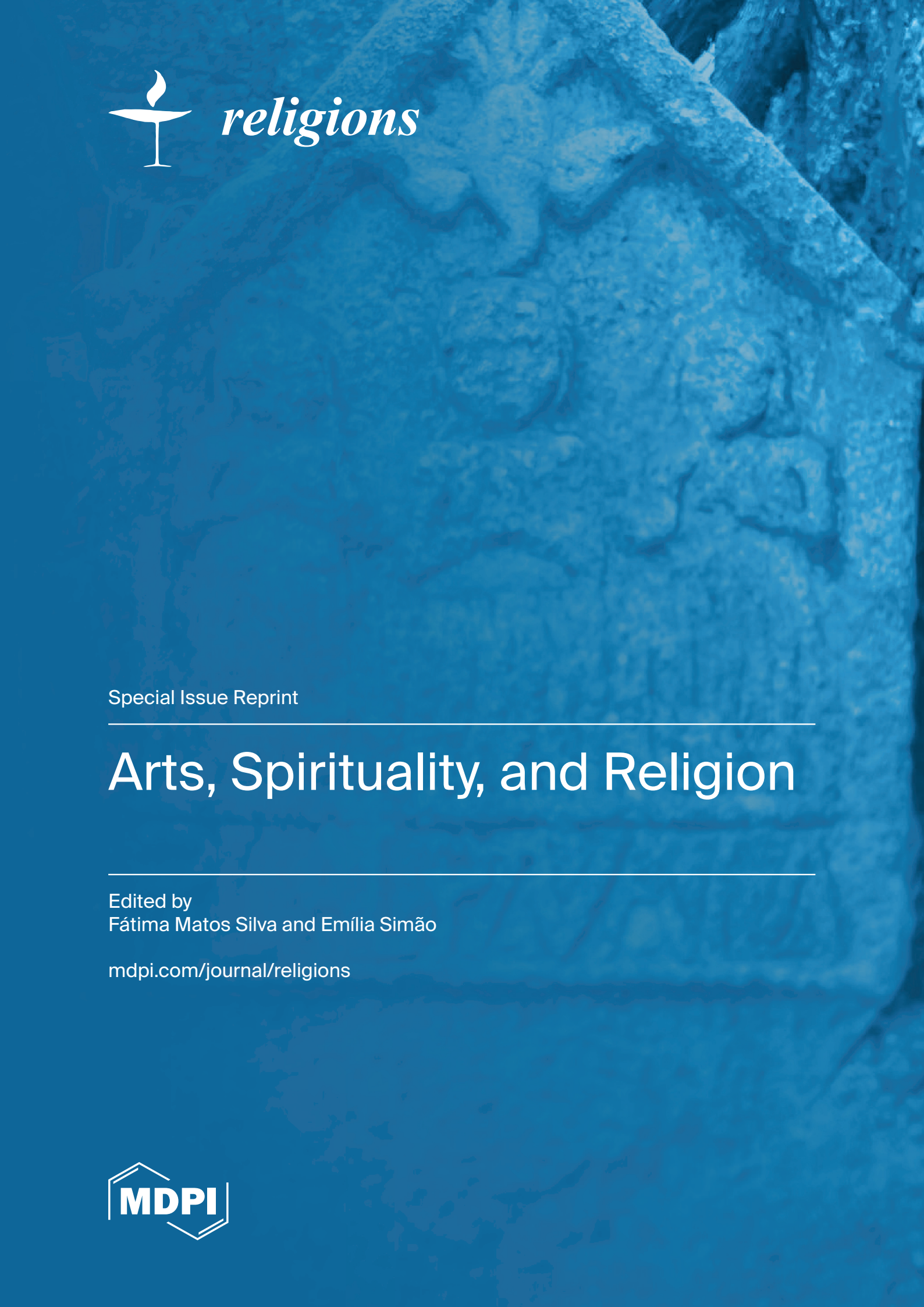

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Edited by
Fátima Matos Silva and Emília Simão

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Guest Editors

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About the Editors

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Fátima Matos Silva has held a PhD from the University of Granada since 2008, with an associate title of European Doctorate, and has been a fellow of the doctoral programme PRAXIS XXI of FCT. Since 1988, she has worked at the Portucalense University as a professor, researcher, and coordinator of study cycles, integrating other bodies, such as the Pedagogical and Scientific Councils. She has extensive experience coordinating national and international research projects and teams. She is a senior researcher affiliated with REMIT (UPT) and CITCEM (FLUP). She has directed archaeological excavations, impact studies, heritage enhancement projects, publications, exhibitions, and museum programmes, collaborating with various local and national entities related to culture and cultural heritage. She is the author of books, chapters, and scientific articles (mostly indexed), focused on archaeological and cultural heritage. She has served on scientific committees, organised international congresses, reviewed articles for scientific journals, and is an editor of publications and Special Issues in indexed international journals, thereby reinforcing the project's capacity for dissemination. She coordinates the Cultura@Portucalense project, under the tutelage of the Rectory of UPT, promoting cultural dissemination in line with the United Nations SDGs.

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Emília Simão holds a PhD in Information and Communication in Digital Platforms from the University of Porto (UP), a master's degree in Media Arts from the University of Minho (UM) and a master's degree in Multimedia from the Portuguese Catholic University (UCP). She also holds a Specialist Title in Art Studies from the Escola Superior Artística do Porto (ESAP) and a degree in Communication Sciences from the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (IPG). She is currently the Coordinator of the Digital Media Arts master's degree at Portucalense University and a Professor of New Media Aesthetics, Artistic Emergent Practices, Artistic Research, Art Project, and Interface Design. Her main research focus is on media arts, digital aesthetics, electronic music, immersive environments, and ritual–spiritual arts. Emília Simao is Co-Coordinator of ObEMMA Scientific Observatory of Electronic Music and Media Art, a member of CIAUD-UPT, Research Centre of Architecture, Urbanism and Design, and a member of CITCEM, Transdisciplinary Research Centre for Culture, Space and Memory (UP). She is the author of various communications and publications, mainly on electronic dance music cultures, virtual environments, and media arts. Emília Simão is also a member of the executive and scientific committees of the ARTECH International Conference on Digital and Interactive Arts and the KISMIF International Conference on DIY and alternative cultures. She has participated in several exhibitions as a film director, digital artist, and curator.

Preface

This volume, Arts, Spirituality, and Religion, brings together a diverse collection of studies that explore, from multiple perspectives and at the intersections of art, spirituality, and religion, the religious phenomenon not as a static reality but as a dynamic field of symbolic production, aesthetic mediation, and sociocultural construction. Drawing on religious studies, theology, art history, anthropology, cultural studies, and spatial analysis, the volume examines how the sacred is configured, embodied, spatialised, and re-inscribed through visual, performative, sonic, and narrative devices. From biblical imagination to the contemporary, from popular religiosity to political-religious strategies of legitimation, the studies presented here share a common concern: to understand how religion manifests and transforms through processes of cultural representation and translation.

The reflection begins with an exploration of the episode of the necromancer of Endor, in the First Book of Samuel, analysing the body, power, and transgression in the visual construction of witchcraft. From there, the journey broadens to popular religiosity, as seen in the study of the 'Alminhas" of Sabugal, a material expression of devotion and collective memory, or to ritual practices and spatial transformations within the context of Tujia sacrifice in China. The political-religious dimension is also examined further through the analysis of the strategies of the Mu chiefs during the Ming dynasty, and through the spatial reading of the murals in the Dabaoji Palace.

Modern and contemporary art emerge as a privileged field of symbolic re-elaboration, notably in the reinterpretation of Hell in Robert Rauschenberg's series of the same name, where religious techniques and narrative intertwine, or in the exploration of Tōru Takemitsu's musical visualisations, which evoke cosmic metaphors and processes of spiritual transformation. The relationship among memory, therapy, and society is examined in the study of Hexi Baojuan, while spiritual expression in totemic art is approached through a multidimensional analysis of the sublime, humanistic, and artistic. The volume also includes a reflection on the image of the bell in Taixu's poetry, evoking the resonance between sound, transcendence, and consciousness, culminating in a theological and symbolic approach to the Domus Sapientiae metaphor, according to patristic, theological, and liturgical tradition, highlighting the historical and doctrinal depth of Marian and Christological images.

The scope of this work is thus simultaneously interdisciplinary and intercultural. It brings together contributions from theology, religious studies, art history, anthropology, cultural studies, and spatial analysis, aiming to offer a comprehensive reading of the ways in which the religious is embodied, spatialised, and aestheticised. Its purpose is to foster dialogue between different academic traditions and cultural contexts, promoting a rich and complex understanding of religious experience as a lived, represented, and reinterpreted phenomenon over time.

The underlying motivation for this work lies in the conviction that artistic expressions and culture not only manifest as a reflection of religion but also actively participate in its construction and transformation. In a contemporary context, characterised by rapid social changes and renewed identity tensions, it becomes particularly relevant to revisit how the sacred is imagined, inscribed in space, and transmitted through images, sounds, and narratives.

This volume is aimed at researchers, teachers, and students in religious studies, theology, art history, anthropology, and the social sciences, as well as all readers interested in understanding the multiple forms of expression of the sacred. It is hoped that the contributions gathered here will stimulate new research and deepen the academic debate on the dynamics between religion, art, and society.

The guest editors wish to thank the authors for their important contributions, without which this Special Issue would not exist; the reviewers for their time and effort in analysing and providing valuable comments and corrections; and the editorial team for efficiently managing the review and publication process, with special thanks to the Managing Editor.

Fátima Matos Silva and Emília Simão
Guest Editors

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Article

The Necromancer of Endor (1 Samuel, 28): Body, Power, and Transgression in the Visual Construction of Witchcraft

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Abstract

This article examines the visual reception of the woman of Endor (1 Sam 28) and her gradual integration into the Western imaginary of the witch. In the first section, it offers a concise overview of the formation of witchcraft in late medieval and early modern visual culture, when iconographic and discursive registers contributed to the consolidation of a demonological and persecutory repertoire associated with the female body. Against this background, the study analyzes how the figure of Endor came to be interpreted and represented through increasingly negative categories—eventually becoming a conventionalized motif in the history of art—despite the fact that the biblical narrative originally presents her as a ritual mediator whose role in Saul's episode is not constructed as a paradigmatic case of "witchcraft" in a strict sense. Drawing on a methodology of visual exegesis that brings together cultural biblical studies, art history, and gender studies, this article examines a range of artworks depicting the episode in order to show how visual culture negotiates the boundary between the legitimate and the forbidden, and how the later demonization of Endor reveals persistent tensions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy across different historical contexts.

Keywords: Necromancer of Endor; visual culture; witchcraft iconography; female body; Reception of the Bible; Biblical Cultural Studies

1. Introduction[1]

This research undertakes a visual analysis of the figure of the witch, understood not only as a symbolic agent of evil, but also as an object of desire, transgression, and symbolic power. From illuminated manuscripts to Renaissance painting and early modern prints, visual culture has played a decisive role in shaping the ways in which the witch has been imagined, feared, and represented.

Throughout history, the witch has been constructed within a dual and contradictory imaginary: on one hand, deformed, aged, and terrifying women associated with dark wisdom and the demonic; on the other, young, beautiful, and dangerously seductive women whose bodies embody both temptation and threat. Within this broad spectrum of archetypes, the biblical and almost enigmatic figure of the Necromancer of Endor stands out with particular force. Although her appearance in the narrative of 1 Samuel[2] is brief, it is charged with theological, symbolic, and political tensions. Despite the limited information available about her, she has traditionally been interpreted through patriarchal frameworks that relegate her to the margins of the sacred, portraying her as a transgressor of divine law. Yet far from being a marginal or secondary character, the woman of Endor

has functioned as a symbolic matrix that reappears across centuries of visual and textual discourses, shaping the shifting construction of the archetypal witch.

Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that brings together cultural biblical studies, art history, and gender studies, this paper seeks to reassess the image and function of the Necromancer of Endor through well-established hermeneutical approaches. Within this framework, the methodology of visual exegesis[3] becomes especially relevant, integrating textual analysis with the iconographic interpretation of artistic representations. From this hermeneutical perspective, the image is not conceived as a mere illustration of the text but as an autonomous space of meaning production where biblical studies, aesthetics, and culture intersect. The aim is to offer alternative interpretations that recognize her agency, her role in spiritual mediation, and her power as a figure of female dissent.

2. A Cultural Genealogy of the Witch in Western Thought: From Myth to Persecution

The figure of the witch in Western culture is shaped through a complex web of myths, religious discourses, and visual representations extending from Antiquity to the early modern period. Tracing this genealogy reveals that the Witch of Endor is not an isolated episode in the Bible but a symbolic matrix that reappears and is reformulated in multiple contexts where the feminine, the spiritual, and the transgressive converge.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, characters such as Circe and Medea, among many others, embodied the ambivalence of female power—wise women and sorceresses capable of seduction, bodily transformation, and social disruption. Alongside them, nocturnal demons such as the lamiae and striges—child-devouring creatures associated with darkness—consolidated the idea of the feminine as a link between the erotic and the monstrous (Graf 1997, pp. 21–26; Ogden 2002, pp. 78–94). These figures provided a symbolic repertoire that would later be reactivated and reframed within a Christian key[4].

Biblical and patristic tradition reinforced this negative association. Deuteronomy condemned divination and necromancy (Deut 18: 10–12), defining a framework in which female mediators were excluded from the sphere of the sacred. Augustine of Hippo (1988) reinterpreted such practices as the work of the devil, asserting that all magic was a form of idolatry and demonic deception. This interpretation had far-reaching consequences: any form of feminine spiritual mediation was assimilated to heretical deviation, with medieval theologians referring to these women as *haeretici fascinarii*, *sortilegi haereticales*, or *secta strigarum* (Russell 1972, p. 219).

During the early Middle Ages, however, the official position remained ambivalent. The *Canon Episcopi* (ninth–tenth centuries) denied the reality of nocturnal flights by women who followed the Roman goddess Diana or the biblical Herodias, considering them demonic illusions rather than verifiable events (Cohn 2005). The emphasis was still on correcting popular superstitions rather than prosecuting them.

This fragile balance collapsed at the end of the Middle Ages, when the context of plague, war, and schism intensified the need for scapegoats. Between 1420 and 1430 the essential elements of the demonological imagination were established: the diabolical pact, flight, the sabbath, and infanticide. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), written by the Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, consolidated this vision and emphasized its gendered dimension, claiming that women were more prone to witchcraft because of their supposed moral and physical weakness (Kieckhefer 1976; Levack 1987):

> But since in our times witchcraft is found more often among women than among men, as experience has taught us, if anyone should wonder why, we may add the following: because of the weakness of their minds and bodies, it is not surprising that they fall more readily under the spell of witchcraft […]. For in matters

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> concerning intelligence or the comprehension of spiritual things, they seem to be of a different nature than men, a fact confirmed by the reasoning of the authorities and supported by numerous examples from Scripture […]. Therefore, a wicked woman is naturally more ready to waver in her faith and thus to abjure it, which constitutes the very essence of witchcraft. (Kramer and Sprenger 2016, pp. 118–19)

The construction of the witch was not merely discursive but profoundly visual. From the miniatures of moralized Bibles, where magical practices appeared in parallel with spiritual admonitions, to the engravings of the German painter Hans Baldung Grien in the sixteenth century, the witch became a body marked by nakedness, transgression, and spectral threat (Clark 1999). These images were not mere illustrations; they functioned as pedagogical and spiritual devices intended to shape perceptions of sin and collective fear.

The background of this visual imagery was also linked to medieval conceptions of the afterlife. The Middle Ages developed a rich topography of the spectral—returning dead, apparitions, and mediations between the living and the deceased (Le Goff 1984, pp. 52–60). Within this horizon, the biblical figure of the Witch of Endor is best understood as a liminal character: a mediator between worlds, capable of summoning the shades that rise from the earth and of challenging the boundaries between the sacred and the forbidden.

Finally, it should be stressed that this genealogy is traversed by the dimension of the female body. In medieval Christianity, women's corporeality became laden with spiritual and ambivalent meanings—at once a site of sanctity and of suspicion. The witch thus embodies the diabolical inversion of that power, occupying the point at which female spirituality is rewritten as transgression (Walker Bynum 1987, 1991).

In sum, the cultural genealogy of the witch weaves together ancient myth, patristic theology, devotional practice, jurisprudence, and artistic imagery. Within this intricate network, the Witch of Endor emerges as a privileged symbolic knot: not a marginal character but a precedent that feeds, redefines, and projects the image of the witch across centuries of art, spirituality, and religion.

3. The Female Body as Site of Sin and Temptation: From Eve to the Witch

One of the fundamental axes in the construction of the witch in Western tradition is the association of the female body with excess, temptation, and transgression. From biblical narratives to medieval and Renaissance iconography, women's corporeality was conceived as ambivalent: simultaneously a source of life and a site of spiritual danger[5]. This perception became a symbolic matrix that nourished later representations of the witch, shaping her image as the embodiment of carnal sin and the destabilizing power of femininity.

3.1. Eve as a Symbolic Matrix of the Fall

The first figure within this tradition is Eve. In the Genesis narrative (Gen 2–3), her role is not limited to an act of disobedience, but is articulated through listening, interpretation, and mediation: she engages the serpent's discourse, evaluates the forbidden fruit, and transmits both word and action to the man. As numerous studies have shown, this configuration situates Eve as a mediating figure whose body and agency become implicated in the entrance of sin into the world (Trible 1978; Bal 1987). Early Christian reception accentuated this reading. Paul explicitly presents Eve as the archetype of the one who is deceived and thus becomes a paradigm for error and corruption (2 Cor 11: 3; 1 Tim 2: 13–14). Patristic thought accentuated this interpretation: Tertullian, in his treatise *De cultu feminarum*,The Adornment of Women (Tertullian 2001, I, 1), defines woman as *porta diaboli*—the gate through which the devil enters the world. Medieval iconography reinforced

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this reading (Bornay 2023, pp. 143–46): Eve appears naked, embracing or in contact with the serpent, emphasizing the union between body, temptation, and the Fall (Miles 1989).

In this sense, Eve became a visual and theological paradigm of suspicion toward women, whose bodies—exposed, vulnerable, and generative of desire—were viewed as channels of spiritual corruption. It is no coincidence that many demonological treatises, including the Malleus Maleficarum, established a direct link between women's supposed inclination toward evil and Eve's legacy:

> But the natural reason lies in the fact that [woman] is more carnal than man, as is evident in her carnal abominations. And note that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, for she was made from a curved rib, that is, a rib of the chest that is bent, as it were, in the opposite direction from that of a man. Because of this defect, she is an imperfect animal, always deceitful […]. And this is evident in the case of Eve. (Kramer and Sprenger 2016, p. 118)

3.2. Salome and Herodias: Eroticism, Excess, and Death

Other biblical figures reinforced the association between femininity, flesh, and excess. Salome—whose dance led to the beheading of John the Baptist (Mk 6: 17–29; Mt 14: 3–11)—became a symbol of the dangerous woman whose bodily allure brings about destruction. Although the Gospel narrative does not mention her name, Christian tradition identified her as the embodiment of the *femme fatale*, whose sensuality causes the prophet's downfall (Meltzer 1989). In medieval and Renaissance iconography, Salome appears as a seductive young woman, often depicted at banquets or holding the Baptist's head, marking the union between eroticism and violence (Expósito de Vicente 2024).

Her mother, Herodias, also played a key symbolic role. The *Canon Episcopi* (ninth–tenth centuries), a foundational text in the medieval conception of witchcraft, claimed that some women believed they flew by night in the company of Diana or Herodias. Although the Church classified these experiences as demonic illusions, the association of Herodias with nocturnal female processions introduced a central motif in the future imagination of the witches' sabbath (Cohn 2005, pp. 209–10). The combination—and often iconographic confusion—of Salome and Herodias thus reinforced the idea of the female body as a space of erotic excess and spiritual subversion.

3.3. The Female Body as a Site of Suspicion

In scholastic theology, Thomas Aquinas held that woman was created as "a help to man in the work of generation" (Aquinas 1958, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 92, a. 1, ad 2), being *deficiens et occasionatus vir* (I, q. 92, a. 1; I, q. 99, a. 2)—that is, an imperfect form of man, although sharing with him the same rational nature. This conception contributed to consolidating a hierarchical anthropology that, in later Christian tradition, associated the feminine with the weakness of the flesh and the sins of lust and gluttony.

In her studies of medieval spirituality, Walker Bynum (1987, 1991) has shown how the female body acquired a particularly charged meaning: a locus of mystical and holy experience (through fasting, vision, and ecstasy), but also a space suspected of instability and excess. In this sense, the witch represents the diabolical inversion of that sacred corporeality: instead of being an instrument of union with the divine, the female body is perceived as the channel through which the demonic enters.

3.4. Iconography of the Tempting and Demonic Body

Visual imagery played a decisive role in fixing these associations. In illuminated manuscripts and moralized Bibles, Eve often appears as a counterpoint to Mary, symbolizing fallen flesh in contrast to redemptive virginity (Mocholí Martínez 2022, p. 24). Other

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biblical women, such as Salome, also suffered from patriarchal interpretations of their bodies and actions—represented as attractive young women whose gesture of holding the Baptist's head underscores the violence of female seduction (Bornay 2023, pp. 143–70).

In the Renaissance, artists such as Hans Baldung Grien took this imagery to a new level. His engravings of witches (*ca*. 1510–1525) depict naked female bodies, both young and old, in explicitly sexual or grotesque postures. These images express the gender anxieties of the time, projecting onto the female body both desire and fear (Roper 2004, pp. 151–59). Baldung also establishes a visual parallel between Eve and the witch: both appear nude, accompanied by animal and demonic symbols—both mediators of an evil transmitted through the body.

The trajectory from Eve to Renaissance witch iconography shows how the female body became increasingly loaded with negative meanings within the Christian imaginary. Certain biblical women, viewed through the patriarchal lens, functioned not only as symbolic precedents but also as frameworks of suspicion in which female corporeality was associated with temptation, lust, and idolatry[6]. Within this horizon, late medieval and Renaissance images of witches—such as those by Hans Baldung Grien—did not emerge ex nihilo, but condensed centuries of theological interpretations, biblical narratives, and visual tropes. The female body, transformed into a stage for excess and transgression, became a privileged site for the construction of the demonic, preparing the ground for the witch to embody, once and for all, the tension between the sacred and the forbidden.

4. The Witch as Mediator Between Worlds: From Psychopompos to "Summoner of Demons"

The religious imagination of Antiquity conceived without difficulty the possibility of transit between the living and the dead. The role of the *psychopompos*—the guide of souls—was associated with liminal divine figures such as Hermes, Hecate, or Persephone, linked to threshold crossings and to practices of necromancy (Ogden 2001, p. 8; Johnston 1999). Literary scenes such as the *Nekyia* of the Odyssey—the opening of a threshold between realms that enables communication with the dead—in which Odysseus consults the departed under the instruction of Circe, illustrate how this mediation formed part of a cultural repertoire articulating the relationship between the living and the memory of the dead (Graf 1997, pp. 101–5). Far from being considered necessarily illicit, these practices could perform legitimate religious functions.

With Christian patristics, mediation between the living and the dead acquired a very different meaning. The Church Fathers established a clear boundary between legitimate cult and necromancy, considering communication with the deceased as an area prone to demonic deception. In Augustinian thought, communication with the dead had to be approached with extreme caution. In *De divinatione daemonum* (ch. 3) (Augustine of Hippo 1956, PL 40, 582, p. 705), the theologian maintains that apparitions attributed to the departed are not true manifestations of their souls but illusions produced by demonic spirits seeking to deceive humankind. Complementarily, in *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* (ch. 10) (Augustine of Hippo 1956, PL 40, 601–602, p. 732) he warns that such phenomena must be interpreted with prudence, for "not everything that is seen is true". Both treatises thus consolidate a theological attitude of distrust toward mediation with the beyond, one that would shape subsequent Christian tradition. This reading transferred the ancient mediating functions into the realm of error and idolatry, reinforcing the idea that women engaged in magical or divinatory practices were not guides of souls but agents of the devil (Caciola 2003, pp. 7–9, 33–36).

In parallel, medieval Christian theology elaborated a rich topography of the afterlife: the emergence of purgatory as an intermediate place multiplied accounts of appari-

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tions and spectral returns, always subjected to ecclesiastical discernment (Le Goff 1984, pp. 130–33). Communication with the dead thus became a field of tension—simultaneously fascinating, perilous, and institutionally controlled.

Within this cultural background are also inscribed certain biblical narratives that recount attempts to access voices from beyond through female mediation. These scenes reveal the persistence of a liminal, ambivalent figure situated between the sacred and the forbidden. In later centuries, both Christian exegesis and visual culture would tend to reinterpret these mediators not as ritual guides of the souls' passage but as "summoners of demons," thereby fixing one of the central matrices in the construction of witchcraft in the West.

The Necromancer of Endor: "The Dead Who, Like Gods, Rise from the Earth and Speak"

The episode of the woman of Endor, narrated in 1 Samuel 28: 3–25, is one of the most enigmatic accounts in the Hebrew Bible. In it converge theological, social, and gender tensions that destabilize the normative framework of ancient Israel. King Saul, abandoned by the legitimate means of communication with God—the dreams, the Urim and Thummim[7], or the prophets—secretly turns to a woman medium at the darkest moment of his leadership. With this gesture he directly contradicts his own policy of expelling diviners from the land (1 Sam 28: 3), revealing the profoundly human character of his despair.

The narrative context, set amid the conflicts with the Philistines toward the end of the eleventh century BCE, introduces a marginal figure—*ʾēšet baʿalat-ʾov*, or "female necromancer"[8]—who paradoxically plays a central role in transmitting the divine will. Despite the explicit prohibition of the Law against necromancy (Lev 19: 31; Deut 18: 11), the story admits not only the persistence of such practices in Israel but also their efficacy. Yet the narrative itself underscores the woman's awareness of the legal and political danger surrounding her practice. Before performing the rite, she explicitly reminds Saul of his own crackdown on mediums and spirit-diviners and asks why he would "entrap" her and expose her to death (1 Sam 28: 9). Saul responds not only with reassurance but with a formal oath, swearing by God that "no guilt" will come upon her because of this act (v. 10). As Hamori (2015, p. 119) observes, the exchange foregrounds the woman's caution and agency: she does not function as a reckless transgressor, but as a practitioner who recognizes the risk and negotiates the conditions under which she will proceed. The woman succeeds in "bringing up" the prophet Samuel, described as "a divine being coming up out of the earth" (1 Sam 28: 13), underscoring the numinous and liminal character of the apparition (McCarter 1980, pp. 420–24).

The scene unfolds in three narrative moments: first, Saul's despair and his decision to consult the medium (vv. 3–7); then the nocturnal encounter and Samuel's evocation (vv. 8–20); and finally, the woman's gesture of hospitality as she feeds the defeated king before his last battle (vv. 21–25). Each part contributes to building a tension between prohibition and necessity, between ritual illegality and prophetic truth. The second act is particularly revealing: despite the risk of death, the woman grants Saul's request, demonstrates ritual competence, and succeeds in mediating between worlds. Samuel's oracle—devastating and irrevocable—confirms Saul's fate. Yet the third act offers an unexpected contrast: the woman tends to and feeds the king in a gesture at once profoundly human and ritual. The closing scene further reinforces this narrative asymmetry. Saul collapses in fear and exhaustion, while the woman stands over him and speaks with authority: "I listened to you … now you listen to me"; and ensures that he eats (vv. 20–25). Her authority is not diminished by any narrative assignment of guilt; on the contrary, Saul's oath explicitly frames her as not bearing guilt (v. 10), a nuance often softened in translation (Hamori 2015, pp. 127–28).

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Exegetical tradition has oscillated between interpreting the episode as a genuine *redivivus* of Samuel or as a demonic illusion permitted by God, in line with patristic and scholastic readings. Other modern interpreters, however, have emphasized the literal meaning of the text, which leaves no doubt about the ritual's efficacy (McCarter 1980, pp. 420–24). This hermeneutical ambiguity precisely reflects the tension between an ancient form of ritual mediation and its later demonization within Christian tradition. This attention to the narrative dynamics of 1 Samuel 28 complicates the long-standing interpretive tendency to cast the woman of Endor as the primary object of condemnation. The Samuel narrative displays remarkably little interest in denouncing either the act of necromancy or the necromancer herself. The message delivered by Samuel's ghost rebukes Saul for his prior disobedience—most notably in the matter of the Amalekites—rather than for consulting the necromancer, and the text nowhere registers an explicit divine objection to the consultation as such (Hamori 2015, pp. 127–28). From a narrative perspective, Saul emerges as increasingly disqualified from kingship, while the necromancer, by contrast, is portrayed as a competent and authoritative mediator who successfully provides access to knowledge when dreams, prophets, and the Urim fail (Hamori 2015, p. 129). This contrast becomes particularly evident when the episode is read alongside its retelling in 1 Chronicles 10: 13–14, where Saul's consultation of the necromancer is explicitly reframed as a decisive transgression. As Hamori (2015, pp. 129–30) notes, this later account reveals how subsequent interpretive traditions intensify a condemnatory reading that the Samuel narrative itself does not foreground.

From a gender perspective, the woman of Endor aligns with other female figures in the Samuel cycle—Hannah, the prophet's mother (1 Sam 1), or the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14), who enters the scene after the devastating episode of Tamar, King David's daughter—who, from marginal positions, mediate in decisive moments of history. Her body and her voice become channels of revelation, exercising a symbolic authority that exceeds the limits of a patriarchal and centralized system. Far from being a mere anonymous medium, her actions articulate a triple role: prophetic, ritual, and compassionate.

In the broader horizon of the history of religions, the *ʾēšet baʿalat-ʾov* of Endor emerges as a paradigmatic liminal figure: she connects life and death, power and vulnerability, judgment and care. At the same time, her ambiguous position between what is permitted and what is forbidden anticipates the later construction of the witch as a dangerous mediator between worlds. Her story serves—among many subsequent discourses—as a hinge for examining how theological and visual traditions projected onto her, and onto analogous figures, the imaginary of witchcraft in which the sacred and the demonic become entwined.

5. Rising Shadows: The Aesthetics of the Spectral in the Necromancer of Endor

While the biblical narrative allows the woman of Endor to emerge as a remarkably agentive figure—one who recognizes the dangers of her practice, negotiates the terms of the encounter, and ultimately mediates access to knowledge when royal and prophetic channels have failed—Western visual reception tends to reverse this asymmetry. In the longue durée of Christian and post-medieval imagination, the authority that 1 Samuel 28 implicitly grants to this female ritual mediator is progressively displaced, re-coded, and finally neutralized: rather than being remembered as a practitioner who "comes off well" in contrast to Saul, she is increasingly absorbed into the collective iconography of witchcraft. This shift is not merely terminological but visual and ideological. The medium's mediating function—her capacity to stand at the threshold, to address the dead, and to manage the encounter—often becomes secondary to signs that mark her as transgressive, suspicious,

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or demonic. The pictorial tradition frequently relocates agency away from her body and speech and into external forces: the apparition dominates the scene, male witnesses frame the action, or the woman's presence is reduced to a sinister catalyst rather than a decisive interlocutor. In this way, the Western artistic afterlife of Endor participates in a broader process by which female mediation is rendered illegible as authority and reinterpreted as heterodoxy: what the biblical text presents as a complex and narratively productive form of female dissent is visually transformed into an emblem of illicit power, and eventually into an heir of the witch archetype itself. It is precisely in the formal strategies of representation—placement within the pictorial space, gesture and gaze, the distribution of attention between bodies, and the iconographic coding of "the forbidden"—that this gradual delegitimation of Endor can be traced.

The episode of Endor, with its evocation of the dead and its transgression of normative boundaries, becomes a privileged site for artistic experimentation, particularly in periods when the prophetic, the supernatural, and the marginal feminine converge as charged symbolic categories. Artistic representations of the Necromancer of Endor consistently portray the woman as a visual threshold between worlds, the realm of the living and that of the dead, the divine and the forbidden. Her image is charged with tension: she is central to the narrated event yet often displaced within the pictorial frame, a reflection of the cultural ambivalence toward feminine mediation[9]. Across the corpus analyzed below, Endor's agency is repeatedly negotiated through a set of codified visual strategies: the partial concealment of the woman's face or body (veil, shadow, back-turned posture), the selective exposure of male figures to the viewer's gaze, and the redistribution of ritual agency from the woman's speech and gesture to the apparition itself or to male witnesses who frame and authorize the scene.

5.1. William Blake: Vision, Expressivity, and the Breaking of Canons

Among William Blake's most remarkable works stands the watercolor *The Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul* (*ca.* 1800) (Figure 1). The English artist, known for his visionary spirituality and his rejection of academic tradition, often turned to biblical episodes that were rarely depicted in Western iconography, from prophetic visions such as Ezekiel's to narrative scenes like Jacob's ladder or the entombment of Christ.

Figure 1. William Blake, *The Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul*, ca. 1800. Reproduced from the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; public domain image, CC0.

In this work, Blake situates the female figure in a prominent compositional position, emphasizing her mediating role, while the scene accentuates gesture to heighten the drama of the encounter: the open hands of Saul and the woman, their intense gazes and slightly parted lips. Expressive force prevails over naturalistic representation, reflecting Blake's

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visionary spirit in contrast to academic convention. The woman's conspicuous visibility, her face, hands, and bodily orientation offered to the viewer, functions here as a visual authorization of her mediating role, in sharp contrast to later images in which that role will be progressively displaced or obscured.

By contrast, a work in dialogue with Henry Fuseli's interpretation of the same episode, *The Spirit of Samuel Appearing to Saul* (1783) (Figure 2), shares with Blake's version a visionary sensibility that transcends the biblical narrative. The medium does not completely kneel nor adopt an attitude of submission; her inclined body, almost suspended in the air, maintains her as an axis uniting both worlds. Her tense gesture and the radiance rising from the ground position her as a mediator of an ambiguous energy—both feared and necessary. Fuseli conceives necromancy not as moral transgression but as a liminal experience in which the feminine embodies the passage between the visible and the invisible. Yet even in Fuseli, the medium's authority remains precarious: her body becomes the site where terror and necessity converge, while the apparition's radiance begins to claim the visual primacy that later traditions will use to eclipse her agency.

Figure 2. Henry Fuseli, *The Spirit of Samuel Appearing to Saul*, 1783. Image courtesy of New York Public Library; public domain.

5.2. Benjamin West: Dramatism, Theatricality, and Old Age

In *Saul and the Witch of Endor* (1783) (Figure 3), Benjamin West approaches the same episode through a neoclassical lens. The Anglo-American history painter was distinguished by his ability to dramatize biblical and political episodes in a moralizing key—such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the expulsion from paradise, or Christ healing the sick.

Figure 3. Benjamin West, *Saul and the Witch of Endor*, 1783. Reproduced from Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art; public domain (CC0).

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In West's version, the scene of Endor unfolds with restrained drama, characteristic of late eighteenth-century neoclassical moralism. The composition is organized around three focal points: the medium, on the left, holds a staff and initiates the conjuration; in the center, the spectral figure of Samuel, wrapped in a white veil and surrounded by vapors, emerges with an admonitory gesture; and to the right, Saul collapses to his knees, his face hidden, while his attendants recoil in terror into the shadows. Crucially, the composition distributes visibility along gendered lines: Saul and his men are staged as spectators of the miracle and, simultaneously, as figures displayed to the viewer in a theatre of fear, whereas the woman's ritual labor is reduced to a functional trigger at the edge of the scene. The supernatural light emanating from the prophet divides the space between revelation and darkness, intensifying the contrast between the divine and the forbidden. West avoids visionary exaltation and opts instead for moral theatricality: the scene does not glorify magic but transforms the prodigy into a lesson on the despair of power separated from God.

The image of the female mediator as an elderly woman, with sharp features and a disturbing gaze, coincides with the biblical interpretation of Adam Elsheimer, later engraved by John Kay at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Figure 4). The engraving technique enhances the representation of old age and physical deformity as visual signs of transgression, reinforcing the association between occult knowledge, the female body, and moral decay. Still more terrifying are representations such as Gabriel Ehinger's print (mid-seventeenth century)[10], in which the episode reaches an almost macabre intensity. At the center of a crypt or funerary chamber, the specter of Samuel rises from the ground still wrapped in burial shrouds. Before him, Saul bends in terror, body recoiled and face hidden, while the witch, in the foreground—her body almost disproportionate compared to the other figures and her torso bare—extends her hand in a gesture of invocation. Her face, furrowed by deep wrinkles and hollow eyes, verges on the inhuman. Her right hand, bony and outstretched, traces the conjuration gesture on the ground with an olive branch, while her left grips a small wand. In these prints, the medium's body becomes an iconographic surface on which the moral meaning of the scene is inscribed: age, exposure, and distortion do not merely "characterize" her, but convert her into a readable emblem of transgression for a public that is positioned, like Saul's men, as a consumer of spectacle and as an implicit participant in the moral judgment of the scene.

Figure 4. Engraving by J. Kay, *The witch of Endor with a candle*, 1805. Courtesy of Wellcome Collection; licensed under CC BY 4.0.

The scene is populated with signs of the uncanny: nocturnal animals (owls, snakes, lizards), spectral figures floating in the sky, and funerary architectures that transform the

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space into a threshold between the world of the living and that of the dead. Elements linked to the iconography of magic and ritual reinforce its spectral quality, as in the works of Philip James de Loutherbourg (1791) or Edward Henry Corbould in the nineteenth century.

5.3. Salvator Rosa: The Sublime, the Irrational, and the Liminal

Already in the seventeenth century, Salvator Rosa had addressed the theme in *The Shade of Samuel Appears to Saul* (ca. 1668) (Figure 5). Rosa, associated with the Italian Baroque, was particularly interested in the sublime, the irrational, and the fantastic, pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional history painting.

Figure 5. Salvator Rosa, *The Shade of Samuel Appears to Saul*, ca. 1668. Public domain—image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons (WGA20058).

In Rosa's version, the role of the witch differs radically from that offered by later artists. Here she is not a mere intermediary but a powerful figure, shrouded in shadow, who seems to command the energy of conjuration. Rosa's witch does not simply mediate; she commands visually (upright, central, and legible) so that the spectator is compelled to read agency in her posture rather than in the apparition alone. Her upright body and gesture of invocation place her at the center of an atmosphere charged with supernatural tension, while around her demonic forms erupt, struggling to emerge from the abyss. Rosa represents the witch as a liminal space between the world of shadows and of light, of darkness and revelation. The specter of Samuel, bathed in cold light, radiates a clarity that does not redeem but delineates. Unlike Benjamin West's moral equilibrium, Rosa explores the unsettling side of the biblical narrative and inscribes it within the Baroque imaginary of witchcraft and the demonic, where the marginal and the forbidden acquire their own aesthetic intensity.

A sense of liminality also appears with great visual clarity in Dmitry Martynov Nikiforovich's *The Shade of Samuel Invoked by Saul* (1857) (Figure 6). To the left, the woman, standing and wrapped in a dark veil, raises both hands toward the apparition, as if channeling the supernatural light emanating from the specter. Her upright body acts as an axis of communication between two planes: the earthly, dominated by Saul's reddish mantle and reinforced by a diagonal composition, and the spiritual, enveloped in a translucent luminosity, conveyed through the vertical arrangement. Yet Nikiforovich's most revealing

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device is the woman's orientation: she is turned away from the viewer, her face withheld, while the male figures (with the exception of the specter) remain fully exposed to the public gaze. The scene thus stages a gendered economy of visibility. Endor performs the rite, but her identity is visually bracketed; male bodies (fearful, reactive, and theatrically legible) become the privileged carriers of meaning. In this configuration, the woman's agency is present yet veiled: it operates as a necessary condition of the apparition while being denied the representational visibility that would allow it to read as authority. A similar visual strategy can be observed in nineteenth-century Russian painting, for example, in Nikolai Ge's *The Witch of Endor* (ca. 1856)[11], where the woman's posture and partial withdrawal from the viewer's gaze contrast with the expressive centrality of Saul, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy of visibility.

Figure 6. Dmitry Martynov Nikiforovich, *The Shade of Samuel Invoked by Saul*, 1857. Public domain—image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Through these examples of the aesthetics of the spectral, the figure of the Necromancer of Endor is rewritten in very different keys: visionary and expressive, sinister and obscure, liminal and ritual. Yet in all of them, one element remains constant: the woman as a visual mediator between worlds, caught in the ambivalence of being at the center of the event and, at the same time, at the margins of representation. This ambivalence also manifests in the aesthetic construction of the witch's figure—oscillating between old age and youth, between servitude and visionary authority, between the degraded body and the symbolic potency of one who sustains contact with the invisible. The aesthetics of the spectral thus reveal both the fascination with the supernatural and the cultural anxieties surrounding feminine knowledge and the transgression of religious boundaries.

6. Reemergence and Reformulation of the Myth

When analyzing the representations of the Necromancer of Endor in visual and theological history, one might assume that the myth and stigma of witchcraft have been confined to the past. Yet the twentieth century does not simply "leave behind" the demonological image forged in earlier periods; rather, it reworks it through new regimes of meaning. If early modern visual culture often displaced Endor's agency by aligning spectatorship with male fear and by relocating ritual authority to the apparition, modern and contemporary contexts increasingly interrogate precisely those mechanisms of marginalization—visibility, voice, and the inscription of violence on the female body. For an early twentieth-century example of the motif's persistence prior to the feminist reappropriations of the 1960s, see Adalbert Trillhaase, *Die Hexe von Endor* (ca. 1927)[12]. A closer examination of Trillhaase's *Die Hexe von Endor* complicates any assumption that increased visibility nec-

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essarily entails a positive re-evaluation of the figure. Although the woman occupies the foreground of the composition and commands immediate visual attention, her presence remains firmly inscribed within a negative iconographic register. Particularly striking is her yellow garment, a chromatic choice that resonates with a long visual tradition in which yellow functions as a marker of moral ambiguity, marginality, and suspicion, frequently associated with figures such as Judas Iscariot or, in more ambivalent ways, Mary Magdalene. As studies of medieval and early modern color symbolism have shown, yellow often carries a stigmatizing or morally ambivalent valence, especially in contexts of social or religious deviance (Pastoureau 2006, pp. 228–38). Rather than signaling rehabilitation, this chromatic coding aligns the Witch of Endor with inherited visual languages of stigma, suggesting continuity rather than rupture with earlier representations. In this sense, Trillhaase's work exemplifies how early twentieth-century reinterpretations could intensify the visibility of the female figure while still reproducing the symbolic structures that cast her as morally compromised and socially othered.

However, since the second half of the twentieth century we have witnessed a profound process of re-signification[13]. The 1960s, marked by movements of social and political liberation, saw the figure of the witch reclaimed as an emblem of emergent feminism. The famous slogan of the radical collective *W.I.T.C.H.* (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, founded in 1968) encapsulated this shift: the witch ceased to be merely an object of persecution and became a political subject—a banner of resistance and of female empowerment—in line with the work of Federici (2019).

In this new horizon, the witch is no longer a passive subject onto whom social fears are projected, but an active, assertive, and intellectual body. Contemporary visual culture echoes this transformation by exploring the figure of the witch as a space of memory, dissidence, and alternative spirituality.

A paradigmatic example is Kiki Smith's sculpture *Woman on Pyre Kneeling* (2002) (Figure 7), an artist who has consistently worked on the relationship between body, spirituality, and memory. The piece explicitly alludes to women burned at the stake—both within the historical context of the witch hunts and in its archetypal dimension. Yet instead of depicting a defeated body, Smith presents a figure that accepts her fate with defiant serenity. The sculpture does not seek to provoke facile compassion but rather to elicit an uncomfortable reflection on how social and institutional violence has been inscribed upon female bodies (Posner 2005). In this sense, the body becomes a container of memory, history, and spirituality: the body on the pyre stands not merely as a victim but as a witness to the wounds of history.

Read against the long iconographic tradition in which Endor's agency is visually neutralized, Smith's kneeling figure reverses the logic of spectacle: the female body is no longer a readable emblem of transgression for public consumption, but a site of testimony that resists the viewer's power to classify and condemn.

Read within this horizon, the figure of the Necromancer of Endor acquires renewed strength. Just as Smith's sculpture summons silenced victims to transform them into witnesses, the nameless woman of 1 Samuel 28 allows us to look beyond the boundaries imposed by official religion and by patriarchal interpretations dominant in exegetical history. As Trible ([1984] 2022) proposed in her seminal Texts of Terror, and later Ivone Gebara from Latin American feminist theology (1999), a feminist reading of Scripture entails recovering the silenced voices and attending to the women who inhabit the margins of the biblical narrative. Within this hermeneutical horizon—and from the experiences of women, Afrodescendant peoples, or marginalized communities—this biblical medium may also be understood as a prophetic, mediating, and caregiving figure, a bearer of a spirituality long denied yet persistently alive.

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Her final gesture—feeding the fallen king on his last night (1 Sam 28: 21–25)—interrupts, however briefly, the logic of war and power. Against the patriarchal and militaristic narrative culminating in Saul's death, the biblical story offers the unexpected hospitality of an outcast woman. That gesture, often overlooked in traditional readings, reveals an alternative dimension of revelation: a theology from the margins, from the night, from the excluded bodies. These figures of "terror" in official discourse may become sources of hope and subversion when read from below and through other hermeneutical keys.

Figure 7. Kiki Smith, *Woman on Pyre Kneeling*, 2002. In the digital collection Art, Architecture and Engineering Library. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/u/ummu/x-11-01510/11_01510. (accessed on 8 January 2026). University of Michigan Library Digital Collections.

Traditional interpretations that brand the woman of Endor as fraudulent or demonic reveal more about institutional fears than about the truth of the text. Recognizing her as a legitimate mediator means challenging the systems that determine who can and cannot speak with God. In this sense, her figure approximates what Ivone Gebara and other Latin American theologians have described as a spirituality of resistance: a mode of knowing that arises from the lived experiences of women and marginalized communities, offering a liberating reading in the face of oppression (Gebara 1999). The Woman of Endor does not act from deceit, but from compassion. She does not represent chaos, but an alternative order—one grounded in care, in the bond with the dead, in the listening to a divine voice that escapes institutional control.

The contemporary resurgence of the witch myth and its reformulation as a figure of resistance ultimately allows for a rereading of the woman of Endor as part of this broader genealogy. Her memory embodies the persistence of forms of knowledge and spirituality that, though persecuted, remain alive within our communities—caring until the end, resisting oblivion, breaking the boundaries between the sacred and the profane.

7. Epilogue

Read through historical–theological, artistic, and gendered lenses, the figure of the Necromancer of Endor reveals how the margins of the biblical tradition can become sites of symbolic resistance and alternative spirituality. Far from being an anecdotal episode within the narrative of 1 Samuel 28, this nameless woman embodies a constitutive tension

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in Western culture: the dispute over who may mediate between the human and the divine, who holds legitimacy to transmit the sacred, and who is condemned to silence or suspicion.

The historical and artistic trajectory traced in these pages has shown that the construction of the witch in the West is neither an isolated nor a late phenomenon, but one deeply rooted in a web of ancient genealogies, reinforced by patristic discourse and consolidated within late medieval and early modern iconography. This background allows us to situate the Necromancer of Endor in a pivotal position: not merely as a precursor to the demonized witch, but as a counter-figure that resists absolute categorization. In her ambiguity, she opens a liminal space where the forbidden and the sacred coexist, challenging the boundaries imposed by religious institutions.

The visual representations of this episode attest to the aesthetic power of the spectral. In them, the woman of Endor appears as an embodied threshold, a mediator between the living and the dead, between a fallen king and a reawakened prophet, between patriarchal order and the irruption of the feminine as a locus of power. Images of witches condense the fears and desires of societies in crisis, and for that very reason their persistence in art and collective imagination remains profoundly significant. Across the images analyzed here, this negotiation is not only thematic but formally encoded: who is made visible, whose face is withheld, how the viewer's gaze is aligned with male witnesses, and where the scene locates ritual efficacy, all determine whether Endor reads as authority or as threat. The "witch" that emerges from these works is therefore not a stable figure but a historical construct—recast from period to period in accordance with shifting anxieties about gender, spiritual power, and religious boundaries.

The contemporary resurgence of the witch as a feminist and spiritual emblem reinforces this intuition. Artists such as Kiki Smith have reinterpreted the memory of the witch hunts and the violence inscribed on women's bodies, resignifying them as spaces of testimony, resistance, and wisdom. This shift converges with the work of feminist and postcolonial theologies that have insisted on the need to listen to silenced voices and to recognize the margins as legitimate sources of revelation. Within this horizon, the woman of Endor may be read as a symbolic matrix for alternative spiritualities—not fraudulent or demonic, but mediating, nurturing, and bearer of subversive knowledge.

The aesthetics of the spectral, present in the biblical account and in its multiple artistic reinterpretations, reveal more than a fascination with the supernatural: they expose a cultural anxiety to control access to spiritual power. The mediator of Endor, however, demonstrates that mediation does not belong exclusively to institutions or official prophets. In her marginality, she makes visible the voice of the dead, feeds the fallen king, and offers, for an instant, a theology of care in the face of a theology of power.

In conclusion, the Necromancer of Endor constitutes a liminal figure whose symbolic force traverses centuries of religion, art, and politics. Her image challenges the rigid opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between the sacred and the profane, showing that religious experience can also emerge from what has been excluded. To recognize her place in the visual and spiritual history of the West is not only to reread the past, but also to imagine futures in which mediation, care, and the wisdom of the margins regain their legitimacy, no longer veiled by the regimes of visibility that once converted female dissent into an icon of fear. Like a shadow rising from the earth, the woman of Endor continues to speak to us—not as a ghost of fear, but as a figure of memory, resistance, and hope.

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2 All biblical references have been consulted in the Jerusalem Bible (1992), so this information will be omitted from now on.

3 "Visual exegesis" designates the hermeneutical analysis of images that interpret Scripture within specific contexts: the image functions as an act of reading that selects, emphasizes, or reconfigures elements of the biblical narrative through visual resources (gesture, light, compositional hierarchies, iconographic attributes) and through its insertion into devotional, pedagogical, or polemical practices. In this article, such a reading is developed across several chronological and artistic frameworks. For further discussion of the notion of visual exegesis, see Quash (2022).

4 For an analysis of the representation of the feminine as an ambivalent and transgressive category in the arts, see Bornay (2023). For more recent historical studies, see Prescott (2025).

5 On the diversity of contexts in which the association between the feminine and the sinister is articulated, see the volume edited by D'Amico (2021).

6 On the nineteenth-century profusion of images that articulate the association between the feminine, temptation, and danger—particularly in the construction of the *femme fatale*—see Bornay (2023); and, in a comparative nineteenth-century perspective, Dijkstra (1986).

7 The Urim and Thummim were objects inserted into the breastpiece of the high priest in ancient Israel (Exod 28: 30; Lev 8: 8), used as an oracular means to discern the divine will.

8 In 1 Sam 28: 7 the figure is designated as *ʾēšet baʿălat-ʾôb*, an expression conventionally understood in exegetical tradition as "female necromancer" or "woman necromancer," in reference to practices of mediation with the dead (cf. Lev 20: 27). In this sense, overly literal translations (such as "a woman with a spirit of divination") may obscure the technical use of the term in Biblical Hebrew. At the same time, it is significant that the text does not employ *měkaššēpâ* (Exod 22: 17), an Akkadian loanword used for "sorceress/witch," which indicates that the episode of Endor is not originally presented as a paradigmatic case of "witchcraft" in a strict sense. For this reason, the present study avoids specific Hellenistic categories such as "pythoness," and instead employs descriptive expressions such as "necromancer" or "female ritual mediator" (Hamori 2015, pp. 105–10). The term "witch" is used in a controlled manner as a category of visual and historiographical reception, to account for the progressive demonisation of this figure in later traditions, without presupposing its philological adequacy to the biblical text. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the history of art this iconographic motif has been widely conventionalised under the designation "Witch of Endor," while recognizing that, in many cases, the titles by which these works are known do not necessarily originate with the artist, but are later attributions resulting from processes of classification and reception.

9 Before the representations analyzed in this study, late medieval visual culture already offers a broad and varied repertoire of images associated with the occult, the forbidden, and magical practices, which contribute to shaping a symbolic framework through which biblical episodes such as that of the woman of Endor would later be read. These images should not be understood as direct iconographic precedents, but rather as a visual horizon that establishes an interpretative grammar of ritual mediation with the invisible. Thus, for example, the miniature of a cleric practising necromancy and invoking the devil (London, British Library, MS Royal 2 B VII, f. 227v, c. 1310–1320) already demonstrates, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the association between ritual action, transgression, and demonic presence. Similarly, images of necromancers positioned within a ritual circle (Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, MS Lat. VI 245) present a codified *mise-en-scène*—operator, circle, and ritual objects—that visualizes the controlled evocation of spiritual entities. Within this visual context can also be situated the earliest manuscript representations of *Saul and the Witch of Endor* (fifteenth century, Master of Otto van Moerdrecht. The image can be consulted at: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/The_Witch_of_Endor_(Master_of_Otto_van_Moerdrecht).JPG, ac-

cessed on 10 January 2026), in which the female mediator with the dead appears as the only figure calmly positioned beside the opening from which Samuel emerges. Her posture and hand gestures suggest a clear capacity for action and control, while the resurrected figure is oriented towards her in an attitude of dialogue, seemingly detached from the group of men displaced towards the left margin of the scene, who are depicted as visibly fearful. In later visual receptions, this female figure will progressively acquire a more negative, intimidating, and even demonic character.

[10] Gabriel Ehinger, *Saul Speaks with the Spirit of Samuel* (1675), can be consulted at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1675_Ehinger_Saul_spricht_mit_Samuels_Geist_anagoria.JPG (accessed on 10 January 2026).

[11] Nikolay Ge, *Witch of Endor* (1857), can be consulted at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Witch_of_Endor_(Nikolay_Ge).jpg (accessed on 10 January 2026).

[12] Adalbert Trillhaase, Die Hexe von Endor (The Witch of Endor) (1927), can be consulted at: https://clemens-sels-museum-neuss.de/en/sammlungen/kunst/kunst-der-naiven/die-hexe-von-endor (accessed on 10 January 2026).

[13] Between the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century representations analyzed in this study and contemporary reinterpretations, the figure of the witch undergoes significant transformations within nineteenth-century visual culture and throughout the twentieth century, which cannot be examined here in detail but nonetheless merit brief consideration. In the nineteenth century, the witch becomes inscribed within the visual languages of Romanticism and Symbolism, oscillating between the demonic, the visionary, and the ritual, as evidenced in works by Francisco de Goya (*El aquelarre*), Henry Fuseli (*The Witch of Endor*), or John William Waterhouse (*The Magic Circle*), in which mediation with the invisible is rendered through gesture, circular motifs, and a ritualized *mise-en-scène*. In the transition towards the twentieth century, particularly within Symbolist contexts, the figure increasingly detaches itself from a strictly theological reading in order to function as an archetype of primordial, psychological, or visionary forces, as seen in the work of artists such as Arnold Böcklin and Odilon Redon. In the second half of the twentieth century, this transformation becomes more pronounced: the witch is reinterpreted as a figure of alternative knowledge, female autonomy, or cultural critique in the work of artists such as Leonora Carrington or Remedios Varo, while in more recent practices, such as those of Kiki Smith or Paula Rego, she becomes an ambivalent symbol articulating body, marginality, and power. These contemporary rereadings prepare the ground for a radical resignification of the witch, now fully detached from the traditional demonological framework.

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Art and Popular Religiosity: The "Alminhas" from Sabugal, Portugal

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Abstract: This article examines the "Alminhas" of the municipality of Sabugal in the Beira Alta region (Portugal) as expressions of popular religiosity and cultural heritage. The main goal of the study is to survey and analyse the iconography of tile panels found in 27 preserved oratories within the area. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving bibliographic research and fieldwork conducted across the 30 parishes of the municipality. This fieldwork involved taking photographs, georeferencing sites and collecting local testimonies. The research revealed that Christian themes, primarily focused on saving souls in purgatory, are prevalent, particularly images of Christ crucified, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and angels interceding for the souls in flames. There are also newer devotional motifs, such as Our Lady of Fátima. The findings emphasise the importance of these structures as symbols of local identity and evidence of deep-rooted religious customs, although they are currently threatened by deterioration, vandalism and undocumented changes. This work helps to recognise the "Alminhas" as an essential part of Portuguese religious and popular artistic heritage.

Keywords: "Alminhas"; Sabugal; popular art; religiosity

1. Introduction

At least since the 17th century, popular religiosity has played a central role in shaping and signifying the territory, manifesting in the construction of "Alminhas" (in English, "little souls" or "shrines"), small sacred structures scattered throughout the country. The region of Sabugal, Beira Alta (Figure 1), stands out as one of the most densely populated by these manifestations of popular faith. Additionally, in the regions of Minho and Trás-os-Montes, this type of popular religious heritage is abundant, whereas it is relatively scarce in other regions such as Alentejo.

Along with the multiplicity of typologies and scales, these examples of popular architecture have distinct stylistic affiliations. In many cases, we find a clear intersection between erudite forms and decorations (namely from the Baroque period) and a strong regional imprint, linked to the most varied aspects of popular beliefs and culture.

Figure 1. Location of Sabugal, Beira Alta, Portugal (scale 0:200 km). Source: Google Maps, 2025.

On paths or roads, at the entrance or inside villages, at crossroads or on top of hills, we often find small and simple religious monuments that remind us of the souls of the dead: they are the so-called "Alminhas". They are mainly memorials built to honour and pray for the souls of the deceased, especially those in purgatory, so their primary purpose is devotional and commemorative. However, they also have a secondary, apotropaic function. Because they mark places where the living and the dead symbolically meet, they act as spiritual safeguards for travellers and communities. People believed that by showing respect and praying for the souls, they would, in return, receive protection from misfortune or evil forces.

In Antiquity, several people believed in the presence of supernatural entities along the paths. These beliefs may have been at the origin of the creation of small places of veneration and practices that, over time and with the Christianization of the peoples, contributed to the emergence of the "Alminhas" (Torres and Osório 2016).

Architecturally, the "Alminhas" consist of a niche usually made of stone, topped by a cross, placed alone on a path or embedded in a rural wall, on the façade of a house, a chapel or the portal of a farm. Although the niche assumes considerable value, even for the laborious work it sometimes presents, the panel, usually embedded, is undoubtedly the central part of the construction, as it is in it that the evocation of souls is materialised. The materials used in its elaboration are diverse, ranging from wood, sheet metal, ceramics, and slate to the bottom stone of the niche itself, and to the more recent and abundant use of tile (Silva and da Silva 2024), which has replaced most of the panels made from other materials. The taste and economic capacity of those who order it dictate the choice at each moment.

The figures on the panel are not very diverse. Christ Crucified, the Virgin Mary, or a patron saint mostly occupy the upper plane. Flanking them are almost always two angels, in a waiting position, waiting to remove the souls from the fire or, sometimes, already removing them. In the background, flanking the central figure, appear, in most cases, Our Lady (under various invocations) or local devotion saints. The lower part of the panel is intended for souls, represented anthropomorphically in a position of prayer and supplication, during which the king, the pope, the bishop, the priest or the friar may often appear, thus alerting themselves to the equality of mortals in the face of divine justice (Silva 2001).

A hole for the introduction of alms, placed below the panel, and, in many cases, an iron grate to protect against evil intentions, complete the structure of the monument.

Although it is quite old and already present in the origins of Christianity, the cult of souls came to be represented later through the "Alminhas". Artistic depictions of Purgatory show burning souls—identified by human figures in the flames—begging for help, while angels or saints intercede for them, symbolising purification before Heaven. These representations are prevalent in the "Alminhas", as this study demonstrates.

The Protestant Reformation, unleashed by Martin Luther in the first half of the sixteenth century, denied the existence of purgatory and, consequently, the cult of souls (Almeida 1964). The Counter-Reformation[1], in response to Lutheran doctrine, proclaimed the existence of purgatory in turn. Catholics, affirming their belief and devotion to souls, began to materialise them in these small monuments (Almeida 1964).

According to Gonçalves (1959), in Portugal, the artistic representation of purgatory began at the end of the sixteenth century, with the "Alminhas" appearing in the seventeenth century.

The construction structure, as a religious and artistic heritage, its implantation in the territory and its importance as a testimony to the religious, spiritual, and cultural feelings of the community under study are fundamental reasons to trigger a research study. However, our attention was drawn to the large number of "Alminhas" in Beira Alta, particularly in the municipality of Sabugal, where 329 examples of this type of heritage are catalogued, a result of the intersection of religiosity and popular art. Even more so because the "Alminhas" do not exist in such large quantities in all geographical areas of Portugal.

In view of these findings, our study area is distributed in the municipality of Sabugal, located in Beira Alta, in the district of Guarda, in the northeast of Portugal. It is a border area that borders Spain, currently comprising 30 parishes and covering a geographical area of 822.70 km^2.

Given the increasingly rapid degradation and even destruction of this type of religious heritage, there is a need to study and document it, particularly the panels, which have been the ones that have disappeared in greater quantity. Thus, the main objective is to survey and study various aspects of the "Alminhas" panels existing in the municipality of Sabugal.

This article focuses on beginning an inventory and study of "Alminhas", which is developed in five sections. The first, which now ends, introduces the theme, contextualises it historically and indicates the objectives; the second approaches the existing literature and historical evolution; the third summarises the methodology used in the investigation; the fourth describes and analyses the object of study, and finally, the discussion of the themes and the conclusions reached are presented.

2. Literature Review and Historical Evolution

"Alminhas" and cruises constitute a significant body of popular religious heritage. The existing literature is scarce, and in general, it analyses the possible origins, forms, functions, historical contexts, and geographical distribution. Therefore, there is a vital need to study and preserve it.

The origins of these structures are the subject of different theories and interpretations. Some authors, including Correia (1916, 1937) and Vasconcelos (1991), propose a connection to the Roman altars dedicated to the *Lares Viales*, gods of the paths and the *Lares Compitales*, gods of the crossroads. This hypothesis is often based on the geographical arrangement of these oratories. Espírito Santo (1980) also proposes a pre-Roman origin for Portuguese oratories, also based on geographical arrangement (Rodrigues et al. 2023). Ancient forms, such as simple wooden crosses or stone cruises, may have preceded the "Alminhas", serving as the Church's method of marking territory and discouraging pre-Christian practices at strategic points (Vieira 2019). The religious phenomenon of the "Alminhas" is

understandable from a historical perspective, recognising that different manifestations of the sacred varied according to times and cultures. The origin is linked to an ideology that took shape in a belief, shaped by time and history, which has grown and matured over the centuries (Rodrigues 2010).

Popular religiosity encompasses deeply held religious feelings and a rich practice that draws on lived experiences and emotions. This experiential dimension, centred on interaction with the supernatural through the interpretation of events as having moral significance or divine intent, can be seen as a manifestation of spirituality. Religious belief emerges as the result of a process of interpretation mediated by culture and symbolic language, rather than as an immediate perception (Martín 2009).

Popular religion is thus sometimes associated with spirituality, highlighting the growing importance of extraordinary experiences of transcendence among individuals who move away from established religious institutions. Syncretism, a characteristic of popular religiosity, also incorporates concepts associated with spirituality, such as the reinterpretation of Catholic figures (Virgin, saints) as spiritual guides (Bastidas et al. 2021).

A crucial factor in the development and spread of the "Alminhas" was the theological formalisation of the concept of purgatory. Although discussions had already existed before the Councils of Lyon in 1274 and Florence in 1439, the Council of Trent in 1563 definitively established Purgatory as a dogma (Rodrigues 2010). This led to a strong emphasis on the suffrage of souls through prayers, almsgiving and masses, encouraging the living to help souls in purification (Vieira 2019). This intense devotion to the souls in purgatory became particularly prominent in Portugal, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Almeida 1964).

The Confraternities and Brotherhoods dedicated to souls were fundamental in popularising the cult during the *Ancien Régime*, ordering altars and disseminating specific iconography (Cardoso 2011). The visual representation of souls suffering in flames, often depicted as naked bodies, became common from the seventeenth century onwards, sometimes taking inspiration from larger representations of purgatory located in church altarpieces (Rodrigues 2010).

The "Alminhas" exhibit diverse morphologies, potentially evolving from ephemeral images placed on trees or walls to more permanent forms, such as monolithic structures, small chapels, niches, or oratories (Vieira 2019). These forms, depending on the region, take on different designations and often confuse the various concepts. Similar structures, known as "Petos de Ánimas", are referenced in Galicia from the 16th century onwards (Bouzas 1932; Ferro and Reboredo 2010).

From the end of the nineteenth century, a trend emerged towards simpler forms and production, characterised by more uniform compositions that reduced regional variation (Vieira 2019).

Cruises also acquired catechetical and disciplinary roles after the Catholic Reformation. Cruises and "Alminhas" are commonly found along paths and particularly at crossroads, bridges, and territorial boundaries (Vieira 2019).

The functions of these structures are multifaceted. The primary function of the "Alminhas" is to solicit prayers for the souls in purgatory. They also functioned as instruments of religious education or catechization (Ladra 2013). Over time, they have become recognised as expressions of popular art and cultural manifestations that document the beliefs and behaviours of communities. They serve as a support for memory and local identity.

They can mark places perceived as sacred, such as those where atonement for sins is necessary, or places associated with historical events, disasters, or violent deaths (Vieira 2019). Some are erected as expressions of gratitude for the supposed divine assistance. They offer significant material for the study of iconography, legends, customs and popular beliefs.

Political and social factors also impacted the "Alminhas" and cruises. The Estado Novo regime in the twentieth century, for example, actively appropriated these structures for ideological purposes, promoting their proliferation, restoration or erection as symbols of Christian Portugal (Silva 2009; Neto 2001). Some cruises were specifically built or received commemorative plaques during this period, for example, to mark the centenaries of 1940[2] (Silva 2009).

Urban development and changes in infrastructure over the centuries have resulted in alterations, displacements, or the loss of specific structures (Vieira 2019, p. 30). Modern interventions can sometimes disregard traditional forms and materials, as highlighted in the 1999 ICOMOS charter, which emphasises the need for careful physical intervention while respecting traditional methods and materials (ICOMOS 1999).

The loss of this heritage can be attributed to several factors, including a shift in devotional focus during the *Estado Novo* towards the Virgin Mary, the panel being replaced by devotional images of Our Lady of Fátima, or the niche being filled with a sculpture dedicated to this Marian cult.

3. Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative methodology, focusing on direct observation and surveys of the existing "Alminhas" in the municipality of Sabugal. To identify, catalogue, and analyse these expressions of popular religiosity, fieldwork was conducted between January and June 2025, covering the 30 parishes of the municipality, where a total of 325 structures were identified (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Localisation of "Alminhas" and niches from the Municipality of Sabugal. (scale: 0:2 km). Source: *Património Popular Religioso* https://sites.google.com/view/alminhas. (accessed on 8 October 2025).

Since a survey of this type of heritage already exists, supported by the Municipality of Sabugal, we selected those that currently exist, the twenty-seven that still preserve the panel.

However, in most cases, it has been replaced over time by tile panels (Figure 3). Thus, as there are few publications directly related to this theme, we searched for texts published on this type of popular religious architecture in the geographical area under study, namely in two annual magazines of the Sabugal Museum "Sabucale" (2020 and 2021 editions), edited by the Municipality of Sabugal and publications articulated with these, carried out by the anthropologist and archaeologist of the Municipality and also a monographic work by Luís and Lages (1979), born in this municipality.

Figure 3. Localisation of "Alminhas" and niches from the Municipality of Sabugal with tile panels (scale 0:2 km). Source: Google Maps, 2025.

In addition to the photographic record, each structure was georeferenced using GPS, allowing the creation of a geographic and visually accessible database. Testimonies from local inhabitants were also collected to understand the community's perception and the current function attributed to these structures.

In addition, a documentary analysis was conducted through the consultation of bibliographic sources and existing inventories (namely, those of the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage and local monographs) to contextualise the structures historically and, whenever possible, date their construction.

The methodology adopted thus sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of patrimonial, ethnographic, geographical, and cartographic aspects, allowing for a thorough understanding of this phenomenon within the territory of Sabugal. This approach favoured not only the inventory, but also the enhancement and preservation of a heritage at risk of disappearing.

4. Case Study: "Alminhas" and Panels of Sabugal

The "Alminhas" and the niches are a testament to the religious and cultural sentiments of various communities. They usually appear along old paths, at crossroads, and in other places to remind those who pass by of their duties to God, the Virgin, and the Saints. Often, they pray an Our Father and a Hail Mary in suffrage for the souls in purgatory (Lopes 2015).

Its construction is diverse, faithfully reflecting a popular art that expanded in the eighteenth century as a result of the Counter-Reformation, which emerged to strengthen the religious cult of the Souls in the Catholic world. On many corners, paths, or places, the "Alminhas" appear, symbolising the cult of the dead. These are small altars where one stands to place a flower, a candle, or say a small prayer.

In the municipality studied, the "Alminhas" and their niches, as well as the cruises, are small architectural structures associated with old pilgrimage routes and paths. Their presence is familiar in strategic places, such as intersections or key geographic points, notably *portelas*. In some cases, the different formats are confused, and the inhabitants also refer to the cruises and niches as "Alminhas" (Table 1).

Table 1. "Alminhas" and niches in the municipality of Sabugal.

Location	Description	Image	Detail
01 Águas Belas 40.37615, −7.166986	Granite block integrated into an old roadside wall with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Christ crucified, flanked by two angels, with another angel, souls and flames at the bottom. With the caption: *You who pass by, pray for those who are suffering*. Chronology: unknown.		
02 Águas Belas 40.377466, −7.163751	Granite block integrated into an old roadside wall with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Christ crucified, flanked by two angels, with another angel, souls and flames at the bottom. It once had a protective grille. With the caption: *You who pass by, pray for those who are suffering*. Chronology: 1936.		
03 Sobreira (Pousafoles) 40.397018, −7.181333	Granite block isolated by an old path with Latin cross and niche with tile panel. Description of the panel: Christ crucified, angels, souls and flames at the bottom. With the caption: *Jesus Deliver the/Souls from Purgatory/Sobreira* Inscription: *Whoever breaks the old one, pays for a new one/26-4-1907/Was well built/28-4-1907*. Chronology: 1907.		

Table 1. *Cont.*

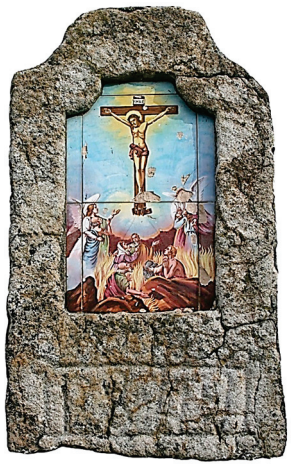
Location	Description	Image	Detail
04 Peroficós (Seixo do Côa) 40.483515, −7.041142	Granite block embedded in village street wall with trilobed cross flanked by pinnacles and niche with tile panel. Description of the panel: Christ crucified, angels, souls and flames at the bottom. Chronology: unknown.		
05 Seixo do Côa 40.463013, −7.026502	Granite structure embedded in a wall near a crossroads and niche with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Crucified Christ and angels removing souls from the flames. Inscription: 1847. Chronology: 1847.		
06 Valongo (Seixo do Côa) 40.46477, −6.999702	Granite structure isolated near a crossroads with a trilobed cross and a niche with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Crucified Christ and angels removing souls from the flames. Inscription: 1883. Chronology: 1883.		

Table 1. *Cont.*

Location	Description	Image	Detail
07 Vila Boa 40.390611, −7.009538	Granite block integrated into an old roadside wall with a cross and a niche with a metallic panel. Considering the characteristics of this panel, specifically the support material, it is the oldest among all those in the municipality of Sabugal. Description of the panel: Christ crucified, souls and flames at the bottom. Chronology: unknown.		
08 Vila Boa 40.381075, −7.005705	Irregular granite block leaning against a wall along an old path with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Christ crucified. Chronology: unknown.		
09 Vila do Touro 40.415789, −7.104785	Granite block embedded in a village wall with a trilobed cross and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Seated Christ souls and flames at the bottom. With the caption: *Grant them, Lord, eternal rest.* Chronology: unknown.		

Table 1. *Cont.*

Location	Description	Image	Detail
10 Valongo (Seixo do Côa) 40.457181, −7.007703	Granite block embedded in a wall near a crossroads with a trilobed cross and a niche with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Fátima, three children (little shepherds), and angels removing souls from the flames. Chronology: unknown. The panel has been placed after 1917.		
11 Eiras (Seixo do Côa) 40.467115, −7.035019	Granite structure isolated near an old road with a Latin cross and a niche with a stained panel. Description of the panel—placed to replace an earlier one, which we do not know, after 1917: Our Lady of Fátima, three children (little shepherds), and angels removing souls from the flames. This structure is severely damaged, and the tile panel is scorched from the wildfires that occurred in this area in August 2025. Inscription: 1851. Chronology: 1851.		
12 Valongo (Seixo do Côa) 40.465642, −7.011528	Granite structure isolated near a crossroads with a Latin cross and a niche with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Angel children and angels remove souls from the flames. Chronology: unknown.		

Table 1. *Cont.*

Location	Description	Image	Detail
13 Seixo do Côa 40.462195, −7.027921	Granite block isolated near a crossroads with a Latin cross and a niche with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Angel, children and angels removing souls from the flames. Inscription: 1950 L SEP (and a spiral). Chronology: 1950.		
14 Águas Belas (Espinhal) L SEP 40.377154, −7.142465	Granite block integrated into a private property wall with a Latin cross in relief and a tile panel. Description of the panel: two children and one angel in a crossing. With the caption: *Guardian Angel* Inscription: *1868*. Chronology: 1868.		
15 Valongo de Cima—Quinta de Cima (Seixo do Coa) 40.453928, −7.003725	Granite block leaning against a wall by an old path with a trilobed cross and a niche with a tine panel. Description of the panel: Saint Michael the Archangel and other angels are removing souls from the flames. Inscription: 1950. Chronology: 1950.		

Table 1. *Cont.*

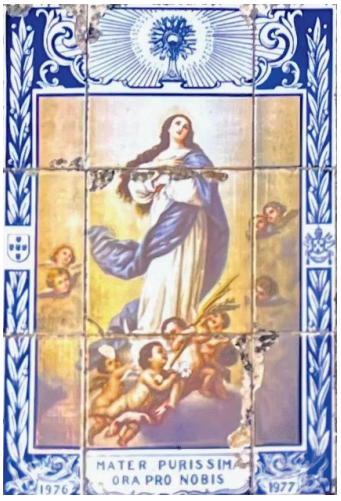
Location	Description	Image	Detail
16 Lameiras de Baixo (Pousafoles) 40.432171, −7.193164	Granite block isolated near a crossroads with a relief cross and tile panel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Mount Carmel and angels. With the caption: *Mater Purissima Ora Pro Nobis/Most Pure Mother, pray for us/1976/1977.* Chronology: unknown		
17 Lameiras de Baixo (Pousafoles) 40.431722, −7.190672	Granite block leaning against a wall along an old path, featuring a trilobed cross and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Mount Carmel and angels. With the caption: *Mater Purissima Ora Pro Nobis/Most Pure Mother, pray for us/1976/1977.* Chronology: unknown.		
18 Monte Novo (Pousafoles) 40.41836, −7.181078	Granite block leaning against a wall along an old path, featuring a trilobed cross and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Child, angels, souls and flames at the bottom. With the caption: *Let us pray for the souls.* Chronology: unknown.		

Table 1. *Cont.*

Location	Description	Image	Detail
19 Pousafoles do Bispo 40.395467, −7.193111	Granite block on rocky outcrops with stairs near a crossroads, a contemporary cross and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Child, angels, souls and flames at the bottom. With the caption in two other tiles: *The keys to Purgatory/We all have them at hand/They are [. . .] good works/Pr[. . .]ration/1980.* Chronology: 1980 (?).		
20 Vila Boa 40.383812, −6.998353	Granite block embedded in a street wall with an empty niche and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Child, angels, souls, and flames, with a cross and an anchor at the bottom. With the caption: *Our Lady of Mount Carmel.* Chronology: unknown.		
21 Penalobo (Pousafoles) 40.383833, −7.213168	Granite structure isolated at the crossroads, featuring a contemporary cross and a decorated niche with a tile panel from the 1970s, which is not well-suited to the existing image format. It has a structure with steps that are more common on cruises. The caption is cut off, reporting the name of the Saint, Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Child. Inscription on a marble slab: *The souls are suffering/there in the fire, night and day/travelers, give them relief/with one Our Father and Hail Mary/197.* Chronology: unknown.		

Table 1. *Cont.*

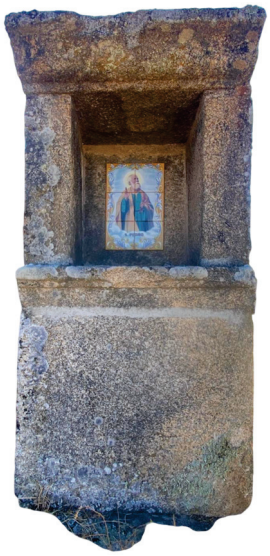
Location	Description	Image	Detail
22 Ruvina 40.41242, −7.01314	Granite block in a village square features a trilobed cross and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Child, with the name of the Saint, *Our Lady of Mount Carmel.* Inscription: *22-4-1979.* Chronology: 1979.		
23 Santo Estêvão 40.29761, −7.161691	Granite block set in a recently added nook embedded in a village street wall near a crossroads with a Latin cross and tile panel. Description of the panel: Saint Stephen image and reference to the name of the Saint. Chronology: 1979.		
24 Aldeia da Ribeira 40.459673, −6.899516	Granite block leaning against a wall along an old path with a niche and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Saint Peter with the keys of heaven and the appointment of the Holy One. Chronology: unknown		

Table 1. *Cont.*

Location	Description	Image	Detail
25 Águas Belas (Espinhal) 40.375825, −7.145745	Granite block isolated on a rocky outcrop in the village, with a tile panel. Description of the panel: Holy Family (St. Joseph, Virgin Mary and Child) with reference to the *Sacred Family.* Inscription: *1855/3/4/1949.* Chronology: 1855. It will be the date of the construction of the granite structure, and 3/4/1949 probably refers to the date of the tile panel's placement.		
26 Aldeia da Ribeira 40.454323, −6.897123	Granite block leaning against a wall along an old path with a Latin cross rested in a pedestal with a niche and a tile panel. Description of the panel: Holy Family in daily activities, with reference to the *Holy Family*. Chronology: unknown.		
27 Vila do Touro 40.406628, −7.102186	Granite structure embedded initially in a private house wall near the road with images in relief (three angels/souls and a bird/holy spirit). Inscription: *PLALPNAM/* *For the Souls, Our Father, Hail Mary.* Chronology: unknown.		

Source: Authors.

Some have small covers or porches. It is also common for them to be located in the centre of the villages, in some cases embedded in walls or the walls of houses. It is also common for them to be located at crossroads of old roads. Not always directly related to

the journey of souls, these niches are, as a rule, places of meditation to protect hikers or travellers. In the twentieth century, there was a revaluation of the "Alminhas" and the practices associated with them. Curiously, concurrently, other modern religious formations also emerged, such as, for example, niches of "Nossa Senhora dos Caminhos" (in English, Our Lady of the paths).

Almost all the villages of Beira Alta have their own small chapel and cross, associated with liturgical rituals, notably the processions held at the time of the feast in honour of the patron saint, which are distinguished by their scale, location, and regularity of use compared to the Parish Church. In many villages, there are several chapels, although as a rule, it is not common for there to be more than one patron saint.

In the municipality of Sabugal, there is a wide variety of "Alminhas" with varying formats. The most common are usually made of a single piece of granite, with the niche and the cross in relief, although many that have the cross highlighted at the top. Some also have a cylindrical or rectangular lower base, but they also exist without this type of base, being integrated into walls or structures. Regardless of its size, the cross seems to be the indispensable element of these structures.

Below the cross, it is common to highlight the niche, with variable dimensions, where the image/representation existed, painted, in relief or in tile. In the older "Alminhas", figurative representations were usually painted directly on the stone (or wood placed for this purpose). In recent cases, tiles have been used to replace older materials. Unfortunately, most niches no longer have these representations visible, in some cases due to natural wear and tear over time and in others due to undue human intervention.

Although it is not possible to determine the precise chronology of these interventions, it is observed that, from the twentieth century onwards, it became common to place tile panels as a form of reinterpretation or symbolic recovery of devotional spaces. This practice is especially evident in the niches found in the northern parishes of Sabugal. In some instances, the panels were carefully adjusted and shaped to match the original niche. In contrast, in others, this concern was not verified, with the tiles being placed outside the niche or even covering it completely. Many, below the niche, have additional decorations or legends such as dates, objects, symbols, text or letters (initials) (Torres 2020, 2021).

The permanence of these monuments in the landscape, even when devoid of the original image—leaving only the cross or inscriptions as requests for prayer for souls—means that such structures are often reused for other forms of worship or religious expression. The placement of panels representing the Holy Family or saints of popular devotion reveals some detachment from the original meaning of the "Alminhas", suggesting a transformation in their symbolic and devotional function.

Geographically, as in other areas of Portugal, the "Alminhas" of Sabugal are located in well-defined locations, such as along roads, paths, and crossroads (Figure 4). The most common iconographic representations depict souls burning in the fire of purgatory, often shown as nearly naked and with their arms raised, accompanied by celestial figures who intercede on their behalf.

In the specific context of the municipality of Sabugal, there is a predominance of examples carved in a single piece of granite, featuring a niche and cross in relief, which denotes a local tradition of production and the permanence of these votive structures in public space.

The "Alminhas" that eventually received additional support for the images and were replaced by tile panels are rare, even with this type of support. Therefore, they were chosen as the focus of this study. Given the geological features of this region in Beira Alta, granite is the most commonly used material. However, accessories made of metal (such as crosses, railings, or alms boxes) are sometimes added.

Figure 4. Typical example of the location of "Alminhas"; number 06, Valongo (Seixo do Côa). Source: authors.

The abundance of granite in the area plays a central role; it is one of the largest granite areas in Portugal, making this material readily available and affordable for construction, especially in rural contexts where other options would be scarce or too expensive. In addition, granite is highly resistant, which is particularly important in a region with a harsh climate, characterised by severe winters and significant summer thermal variations. The durability of granite ensures that these structures stand the test of time and remain visible for decades or even centuries.

The rustic aesthetics of the crudely carved granite blocks also align with the symbolism of the "Alminhas". Its simplicity conveys a certain solemnity and humility, reflecting both the hard life of the local populations and the spiritual condition of the souls who, according to popular belief, await prayers in purgatory. This modest form directly references popular piety, which values devotional gestures over ostentation.

Another important factor is the tradition and local know-how, as many of these "Alminhas" were built by masons or workers with basic knowledge of stone carving, which explains the predominance of simple shapes, similar to one another and without much ornamentation.

It is essential to note that the "Alminhas" serve a devotional purpose rather than a monumental one. They are spiritual landmarks, in which the essential thing is not the grandeur of the play, but instead its spiritual and community purpose.

Over time, "Alminhas" were built following the tradition of marking places where a violent death had occurred, whether resulting from clashes, for example, between smugglers and authorities, since the municipality of Sabugal is a border area with strong traditions of smuggling, or more recently, of road accidents.

This "cult" of souls is associated with various rituals, carried out by congregations of believers, throughout the country, although these customs are currently more prevalent in rural areas. The Brotherhoods of Souls continue to exist in many parishes within the municipality of Sabugal, typically comprising a Judge, a treasurer, and members who hold management positions within the Brotherhood and oversee related events.

The events are directly related to funeral events, namely funerals and rituals (masses) for the souls of the deceased Brothers. To belong to the Brotherhood, members (known as

Brothers) pay an annual fee of approximately €10. The Brothers, in view of the payment and belonging to the Brotherhood, benefit from rights so that the Brotherhood provides the rites of passage of their soul, namely, that they accompany the procession of their funerals, from the Church to the place where they will be buried. In this funeral procession, the members of the Brotherhood of Souls wear black cassocks and carry artefacts, including a cross, a "painting" depicting souls, lanterns, and accompany the clergy and other elements of the Church. Each Brother also has the right to have 10 Masses said for his soul. Once a month, the parish priest of the village celebrates a mass for all the deceased Brothers who belonged to this Brotherhood[3].

The survey of the iconographic representations in the images reveals a strong emphasis on Christian themes, particularly those linked to salvation, heavenly intercession, and the presence of suffering souls. In the following table (Table 2), the iconographic representations of the oratories highlighted in the previous table are numbered.

Table 2. Iconographic representations in "Alminhas" and niches in the municipality of Sabugal.

"Alminhas" Iconographic Representations	**Nº**
Christ crucified, with angels and souls on fire	6
Christ crucified and souls on fire	1
Christ crucified	1
Christ with angels and burning souls	1
Angel with children, angels and souls on fire	2
Our Lady of Fátima, children, angels and souls on fire	2
Angel and Children	1
Archangel Saint Michael, angels and souls on fire	1
Our Lady of Mount Carmel with angels	2
Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Child, angels and souls on fire	3
Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Child	2
Saint Peter	1
Saint Stephen	1
Holy Family	2
Souls on Fire (relief)	1

Source: Authors.

The organisation of the themes can be achieved based on the frequency with which they appear and the combinations between the characters and sacred symbols:

(a) Christ crucified—the figure of Christ crucified appears in several compositions, highlighting the most recurrent theme: Christ crucified, with angels and souls on fire. This combination reinforces the idea of Christ's redemptive sacrifice and its direct link with the salvation of souls in purgatory (6 occurrences—01 to 06);
(b) Christ crucified, with souls on fire (1 occurrence—07);
(c) Christ crucified (1 occurrence—08);
(d) Christ with angels and souls on fire (1 occurrences—09);
(e) Angel with children, angels and souls on fire (2 occurrences—12 and 13).

Of the 27 oratories, eight feature Christ crucified, of which seven have the presence of burning souls and six have the presence of angels. Our Lady of Mount Carmel also appears seven times, with emphasis on the following variations:

(a) Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Child, angels and souls on fire (3 occurrences—18, 19, 20);

(b) Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Child (2 occurrences—21 and 22);
(c) Our Lady of Mount Carmel with angels (2 occurrences—16 and 17).

Of the 27 oratories, seven feature Our Lady of Mount Carmel, 5 of which are combined with angels and Baby Jesus and three are combined with burning souls.

Our Lady of Fátima, a relatively recent cult in Portugal featuring children, angels, and souls on fire, is also represented (2 occurrences—10 and 11). The first appearance of Our Lady of Fátima, in Cova da Iria, Fátima, took place in 1917. Therefore, the two panels are from a later period, and it is notable that the "Alminhas" include modern devotional imagery within the theme of purgatory.

Other Saints and figures were also identified, including the Holy Family (2 occurrences—25 and 26); Archangel Michael (1 occurrence—15); Saint Stephen (1 occurrence—23); and Saint Peter (1 occurrence—24). The combination of Angels and Children appears twice (12 and 13).

An isolated oratory was identified—Burning Souls (1 occurrence—7) that does not contain a tile panel but is made of metal. Hence, it stands out as the only one of its kind in the entire municipality of Sabugal that maintains a panel support used in older times. Like the other "Alminhas", it was integrated into a wall, next to the road. After detecting evidence of possible theft, a popular rescue group saved the oratory, which is currently on private property but publicly visible. This example is carved in relief and has a triangular composition at the top. Below, there are three stylised human figures, arranged side by side, with their hands on their chests—a familiar gesture in religious representations of "Alminhas". Above these figures, one can see what appear to be decorative or symbolic elements, possibly doves or stylised leaves. Below the figures is a Latin inscription—PLALPNAM—which translates to "For Souls, Our Father, Hail Mary," partially worn.

The presence of angels interceding for the souls of the deceased, often interpreted as those in purgatory, is depicted in several compositions. Of the 27 depictions, 18 include angels and 17 include burning souls.

The analysis of repetitions and combinations reveals that the most recurring themes centre on Christ and Marian intercession, particularly Our Lady of Mount Carmel, for the salvation of souls in purgatory, often accompanied by angels. These elements reinforce a visual discourse strongly linked to hope in salvation, the mediation of the saints and divine mercy, characteristic of popular sacred art.

The presence of the cross is visible in 22 oratories. In some cases, they are part of the granite block itself, while in others, it is placed on top of the structure.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The "Alminhas" of Sabugal are not only expressions of faith but also landmarks of collective memory and local identity. They represent the link between the living and the dead, offering as points of prayer and reflection for passersby. Their presence in strategic places, such as crossroads and ancient paths, reinforces their function as spiritual guides and protectors of travellers.

Despite their significance as expressions of popular religious culture, they lack a comprehensive inventory, which is essential for protecting this type of religious heritage. Current inventories lack systematisation, and no scientifically based study prioritises tourist-cultural dissemination above all else, leading to a holistic approach. The inventory process involves extensive fieldwork, detailed photographic documentation, and data collection on location, chronology, material, morphology, iconography, and conservation status. Challenges to preserving these structures include overgrown vegetation, moss and lichen buildup, vandalism, and structural damage, including collapses and fractures.

None of the objects inventoried in this study were found registered in the Information System for Architectural Heritage (SIPA), an information system relevant to architectural

heritage managed by the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC), which reveals a manifest lack of interest in this type of heritage on the part of the state bodies in charge.

Although this is a tiny sample of 27 "Alminhas", compared to the 325 that still exist today, the chronological analysis reveals a tendency to construct them in two distinct periods: in the nineteenth century and later in the 1970s of the twentieth century (Table 3). Of the 27 studied, only 12 have the date of construction, and 5 have the date of placement of the tile panel; the oldest is from 1949.

Table 3. Chronology of the "Alminhas" and the panels.

Number and Localisation	Date of Construction of "Alminhas"	Tile/Panel Date
02—Águas Belas	1936	--
03—Sobreira (Pousafoles)	28 April 1907	--
05—Seixo do Côa	1847	--
06—Valongo (Seixo do Côa)	1883	--
11—Eiras (Seixo do Côa)	1851	--
13—Seixo do Côa	1950	--
14—Águas Belas (Espinhal)	1868	--
15—Valongo de Cima (Seixo do Côa)	1950	--
16—Lameiras de Baixo (Pousafoles)	--	1976–1977
17—Lameiras de Baixo (Pousafoles)	--	1976–1977
19—Pousafoles do Bispo	1980 (?)	1980 (?)
21—Penalobo (Pousafoles)	--	197. . .
22—Ruvina	22 April 1979	--
23—Santo Estêvão	1979	--
25—Águas Belas (Espinhal)	1855	3 April 1949

Source: authors.

Regarding the nineteenth century, there are five; others may have been built during that time, but we do not have their construction dates. In some cases, only the replacement date is provided, while in most cases, it is for previous panels. The oldest dates back to 1847, and the most recent to 1883.

Regarding the 70s of the twentieth century, there are seven, the two most recent being from 1979. In this decade, there appears to be an increase in the construction or replacement of panels, accompanied by the removal of existing ones. There are two identical panels in the same parish, Lameiras de Baixo (Pousafoles), and of the exact chronology.

The iconographic analysis of the 27 oratories in the municipality of Sabugal reveals a strong predominance of Christian themes with an emphasis on the salvation of souls from purgatory. This survey reveals the enduring popularity of a religiosity rooted in the doctrines of intercession and divine mercy, with a particular emphasis on the figure of Christ crucified and Our Lady of Mount Carmel as a privileged intercessor.

The figure of Christ crucified, present in eight oratories, appears in a particularly expressive manner, often accompanied by angels (in eight instances) and burning souls (in seven instances). This iconographic combination conveys to the idea of Christ as redeemer of souls in purgatory, reinforcing the role of sacrifice in the economy of salvation. The repetition of this representation testifies to its central place in the local devotional imagination, serving as a powerful symbol of hope and redemption.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel appears in 7 oratories, in 5 of which she appears accompanied by the Child Jesus and angels, and in 3 associated with burning souls. This configuration is directly associated with the dogma of the scapular and the promise of the liberation of souls from purgatory. Her presence stands out as one of the most evident forms of Marian intercession, serving as a sign of the Carmelite cult that had a profound impact in Portugal, especially after the Counter-Reformation.

There is also an isolated representation of Our Lady of Fátima, accompanied by angels and images of burning souls. This presence, although rare, evidences an attempt to integrate elements of contemporary worship into the traditional repertoire, signalling the vitality and adaptability of popular religiosity, as we have already mentioned.

The presence of angels in 19 of the 27 oratories reinforces the mediating and celestial character of these figures, primarily when associated with burning souls (17 occurrences). The motif of suffering souls is transversal, arising with great frequency and almost always in interaction with intercessory figures, such as Christ, Mary or the angels. This imagetic insistence underlines the concern with salvation after death and the role of prayer and divine mediation in the relief of purgatorial pains.

Among the secondary representations, the Holy Family (2 occurrences), St. Peter, St. Stephen, and the combination of angels and children (2 occurrences) appear. These elements indicate a thematic extension that, although less recurrent, enriches the whole with different devotional nuances.

Also noteworthy is the unique oratory in high relief, number 27, representing the Souls in flames, which lacks a tile panel and is distinguished as the only example of its kind in the entire municipality. This oratory, possibly of a more rudimentary or spontaneous nature, can testify to a particularly local or personal devotion, focused exclusively on the memory and suffrage of the souls in purgatory, without conventional iconographic mediations. Its uniqueness points to the diversity of devotional practices and materialities present in the territory. The sculptural work in granite is reminiscent of the *Petos de Ànimas* Galicians. Petos de Ánimas (meaning 'Boxes for souls' in English are small religious shrines commonly found in rural areas of Galicia, Spain, very similar to the "Alminhas" (Ladra 2013; Rodrigues 2010). Both are used for praying for the dead, placed by roadsides, and dedicated to the souls in Purgatory, according to Catholic belief.

Finally, the presence of the cross in 22 oratories confirms the centrality of the symbol of Christ's Passion in popular religiosity. Its integration into the architectural structure of the oratories—whether carved in granite or placed atop the structure—reveals the visual continuity of the crucifixion as an element that brings together faith and devotional practice.

The Portuguese "Alminhas" can, in some ways, be incorporated into a broader tradition of small devotional practices that characterise the rural and urban landscapes of southern Europe. These structures serve to mark the presence of the sacred in daily life, seek divine protection for travellers, and keep the memory of the dead alive (Rodrigues 2010). However, the "Alminhas" possess unique features that give them a distinct identity within this shared cultural universe. Like Italian *votive capitelli*, Spanish small shrines or altars, and Greek roadside sanctuaries, Portuguese "Alminhas" are expressions of popular religiosity. These religious objects function as symbolic markers connecting secular space with the divine, often placed at passageways and closely linked to the daily lives of local communities. They also share a votive and intercessory purpose, along with iconography that references protection, penitence, and the salvation of souls (Rodrigues 2010). Despite these similarities, "Alminhas" are distinguished by their near-exclusive dedication to the souls in purgatory, making them a uniquely Portuguese expression of post-Tridentine Catholic devotion. While Italian capitelli or Spanish niches often honour protective saints, the Virgin Mary, or Christ, "Alminhas" repeatedly invoke penitential souls, depicted in

flames and awaiting the prayers of the living. This specific theological focus reflects the strong influence of purgatory doctrine in Portuguese religious culture from the 17th to the 19th centuries, as well as the practice of praying for souls as a spiritual act of charity. The physical and architectural design of the "Alminhas" also demonstrates this: their simplicity contrasts with other European votive forms, emphasising the community and popular nature of this devotion. Their social role is equally distinct: as passersby walk by, they recite a brief prayer and sometimes leave an offering, a practice that reinforces the ongoing interaction between public space, the memory of the deceased, and daily devotion. In summary, although "Alminhas" share with other roadside sanctuaries of southern Europe the votive character and mediating role between humans and the divine, they are distinguished by their specific focus—the souls in purgatory—and by their subtle yet consistent integration into the Portuguese cultural landscape. Their uniqueness lies precisely in this blend of popular religiosity, collective memory, and the sacred's physical presence in everyday spaces.

The iconographic analysis of the oratories of the municipality of Sabugal allows us to conclude that local popular religiosity is organised around a set of themes central to Catholic doctrine: the sacrifice of Christ, the intercession of the Virgin Mary (especially under the invocation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel), angelic mediation and hope in the salvation of souls in purgatory.

The frequency with which these elements emerge, as well as their combinations, reveals a consistent and articulate visual discourse, deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. This discourse reinforces values such as divine mercy, hope in eternal life and the importance of the intercession the saints and prayer for souls. At the same time, the diversity of representations—including specific saints, the presence of children, and the incorporation of elements of modern worship such as Our Lady of Fátima—testifies to the vitality and continual adaptation of the popular faith.

The oratories analysed are not only artistic and architectural testimonies, but also true landmarks of a community's spirituality, expressed visually through powerful and universally recognisable symbols within the context of Catholicism. They represent a lived faith, in which the visible communicates the invisible and in which suffering, hope, and salvation meet in permanent dialogue.

The material used to support the niches is, in all cases, granite and structurally they are all very similar, without sculptural elaborations of relief or with characteristics that allow a more precise dating, as is the case with the baroque ones found in Minho, for example, in Paredes de Coura (Silva and da Silva 2024). In fact, in most cases, these are simple columns, surmounted or engraved with crosses and a small niche dug, but with little depth. The simplicity of these oratories reflects the simplicity of this territory, composed chiefly of small rural towns and without extraordinary manifestations of wealth or ostentation, except for some religious architecture, which stands out from the rest of the landscape.

Unfortunately, replacing the original panels with relatively recent tiles detracts from many of their original characteristics. Because these structures are located in areas of passage, this territory borders Spain, and many of its ancient paths were used as smuggling routes, a common practice in border territories like this one. Over time, they have been subject to theft and vandalism; additionally, because they are exposed, they are also susceptible to the natural wear and tear caused by the adverse weather conditions of this region. It is also noticeable that some contemporary panels have replaced previous panels.

"Alminha" 03, built in 1907, has a fascinating, unusual and rare inscription, which attests to the fact that human action is an essential factor, probably the most common, in terms of risks and acts of vandalism, in relation to this type of heritage: *Whoever breaks the*

old one, pays for a new one. The phrase may also suggest that it is a reconstruction and serves as a warning against repeating the act of vandalism.

Proposals to protect this heritage include advocating for its legal recognition and safeguarding, as outlined in Law No. 107/2001, which provides the foundation for cultural heritage protection. This involves establishing a continuous maintenance plan and ensuring that experts perform restorations using traditional methods and materials. It is also important to develop educational initiatives to increase public awareness. However, since managing public assets faces significant challenges, such as limited human and financial resources, various associations and other entities across the country have contributed to its inventory and raised awareness about its preservation. Furthermore, this situation is familiar to all those referred to as "minor" cultural heritage, such as religious ethnographic relics, which also fall into this category.

Based on the results presented, future research on the "Alminhas" of the municipality of Sabugal can explore different complementary avenues. First, a comparative study of oratories from other municipalities in Beira Alta and other regions of Portugal would be valuable for identifying iconographic, technical, and material similarities and differences used in both the construction of the structures and the panels, as well as in the devotional practices. A second approach could focus on material and conservation analysis, including laboratory tests of tiles, mortars, and pigments to better understand the original techniques and guide suitable restoration efforts.

Another promising area of research is the ethnographic and immaterial aspect, which enriches the collection of oral testimonies about rituals, prayers, and traditions related to the "Alminhas" before these memories fade with the ageing local population. Creating a georeferenced digital archive that includes high-resolution photographs, historical records, and interviews would not only preserve this information but also make it accessible to researchers, schools, and visitors.

Regarding preservation solutions, several options can be recommended, such as establishing preventive conservation programmes with regular monitoring of the condition of oratories and small maintenance interventions to prevent structural deterioration; forming partnerships between municipalities, parishes, and higher education institutions to involve specialists in this type of heritage and in conservation and restoration; promoting tourism and educational initiatives, for example, through interpretive itineraries and signage to raise awareness among residents and visitors about the heritage value of the "Alminhas"; or even applying for national and European heritage grants and funds to secure financial resources for restoration and dissemination. In this way, the following steps combine multidisciplinary research and tangible preservation efforts, ensuring that the "Alminhas" remain not only artistic and religious symbols but also living parts of the cultural identity of Sabugal and other areas.

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Notes

1 The Counter-Reformation was a movement focused on renewing and defending the Catholic Church that emerged in the 16th century as a response to the Protestant Reformation started by Martin Luther. Its main goals were to reaffirm Catholic doctrines, reform internal practices, and fight the spread of Protestantism. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) was the key moment in this process, defining dogmas on the sacraments, papal authority, and the importance of good works and tradition, while also promoting clerical discipline and religious education. The Counter-Reformation also appreciated art, liturgy, and popular devotion as ways to strengthen faith, leading to the development of the Baroque style and many visual and emotional expressions of religiosity typical of Catholic countries in southern Europe.

2 The Centenaries of 1940 (or "Commemorations of the Double Centenary of 1940") were a significant series of official celebrations organised by the Estado Novo, the regime of António de Oliveira Salazar, to mark two crucial moments in Portugal's history. Salazar's government described 1940 as a "symbolic year of nationality," celebrating the 800th anniversary of Portugal's founding in 1140, which is linked to the proclamation of D. Afonso Henriques as king, and the 300th anniversary of the Restoration of Independence in 1640, the year Portugal regained sovereignty after 60 years of Philippine rule and the union with Spain between 1580 and 1640.

3 The Confraternities of the Cult of Souls in Italy display a deeply communal and visual form of religiosity, focused on collective prayers for the souls in Purgatory, reflecting post-Tridentine spirituality. They are characterised by strong ritual and aesthetic elements, such as processions, churches dedicated to the souls, and iconography filled with symbols of suffering and hope—flames, skulls, figures of penitent souls—that embody the Baroque and urban sensibility of southern Italy. They differ from similar brotherhoods in other Catholic regions, like Portugal, where the cult of the souls has adopted more discreet and popular forms, seen in small "Alminhas," individual acts of piety, and rural brotherhoods, especially in the region discussed in this article.

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Article

The Religious-Political Strategy of the Mu Chieftains in Ming Dynasty Lijiang: A Spatial Analysis of the Murals in the Dabaoji Palace

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Abstract

This article examines the murals of Dabaoji Palace in Lijiang during the Ming Dynasty, analyzing their tripartite religious spatial configuration to elucidate how the Mu chieftains visualized and asserted their political and cultural agency as local elites operating at the empire's south-western frontier within the framework of imperial authority. Through an interdisciplinary methodology that combines textual research, spatial analysis, and iconographic interpretation, the study identifies and theorizes a threefold religious spatial model in Dabaoji Palace: a Daoist facade symbolizing allegiance to the Ming court, a Han Buddhist-dominated central hybrid space asserting political authority and local agency in cultural mediation, and a secluded Tibetan esoteric sanctum providing sacral legitimacy for frontier governance. This tripartite spatial configuration is interpreted as a strategic localization of religious space that embodies the Mu chieftains' response to Ming frontier administration. By highlighting the Sino-Tibetan artistic synthesis in the murals, the paper argues that the Mu chieftains, as Naxi elites in a borderland context, crafted a visual narrative of frontier rule that both reinforced their ties to the Ming court and forged a distinctive local identity. In doing so, their initiatives contributed to the cultural integration of multiethnic communities in northwest Yunnan and laid the foundation for the formation of a shared national identity.

Keywords: Dabaoji Palace murals; Lijiang Mu chieftains; religious spatial configuration; political strategy; Ming frontier governance

1. Introduction

Lijiang, homeland of the Naxi people, occupied a strategic position as a cultural and geopolitical corridor between Han Chinese and Tibetan civilizations in the north-western frontier of Yunnan province. Under the native chieftain (tusi 土司) system during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Lijiang developed into a pivotal administrative hub for imperial oversight of Tibet. Among its most enduring cultural legacies is the Baisha mural complex, with the murals of Dabaoji Palace standing out for their artistic sophistication and historical significance. Based on inscriptional and scholarly evidence, Dabaoji Palace (Figure 1) was constructed in 1582 under the patronage of the 17th native chieftain, Mu Wang, and its murals were commissioned in 1643 by his grandson Mu Zeng, at the height of Mu political, military, and cultural authority. In contrast to the earlier murals of Liuli Hall (c. 1345–1426), which conformed closely to Han Chinese conventions (*Lijiang Baisha Murals*, Lijiang Naxi

Autonomous County Cultural Bureau and Lijiang Naxi Dongba Cultural Museum 1991), the Dabaoji program integrates Han Buddhism, Daoism, and Tibetan Buddhism into a regionally distinctive visual style, indicating an esthetic and ideological synthesis rooted in the Mu chieftains' frontier governance strategies.

Figure 1. Exterior of Dabaoji Palace, modeled by the author.

This paper addresses a central question: how does the spatial configuration of the Dabaoji Palace murals narrate the Mu chieftains' religious, political, and cultural strategies? By conceptualizing Dabaoji Palace as an integrated site of religious devotion, visual production, and political expression, this study interprets the spatial arrangement of its mural program as a deliberate articulation of frontier statecraft. Through the progression from a Han-style Daoist facade to a Han Buddhist-centered hybrid zone and culminating in a Tibetan esoteric sanctum, the murals reveal a spatial schema that corresponds to the Mu chieftains' frontier governance strategy of juxtaposing Han-Tibetan visual traditions with Han primacy within the Ming imperial administration.

Scholarship on the murals of Dabaoji Palace has laid essential groundwork for this study. Debreczeny (2009) achieved a significant breakthrough by systematically deciphering all Tibetan inscriptions on the murals. Through cross-referencing the inscriptions of the Mahāmudrā Lineage on the west wall with that of Guanyin Pumen on the north wall, he dated the murals to 1643–1646, thereby resolving longstanding chronological uncertainties. Xiong Wenbin (Xiong et al. 2013) further collated and translated these Tibetan inscriptions into Chinese, identifying key deities and elucidating the connection between Lijiang and the Karma Kagyü tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In terms of spatial interpretation, Mu (2020) examined the central caisson motifs, while P. Yan (2023) analyzed the secular roles of Daoist murals, both highlighting localized cultural-political metaphors within specific religious zones. However, their analyses did not address the murals' full spatial hierarchy as an integrated visual system. From a historical perspective, scholars such as F. Yang (1996), Guo (2015), Feng (2008), and An (2014) have examined the Mu political strategies and framed the murals as cross-cultural visual production. Yet these studies largely overlook the murals' spatial configuration as a religious-political visual narrative. Prior research has thus remained fragmented—focusing on iconographic details or textual content while leaving the spatial logic and its implications under-examined.

This study introduces a new framework from the perspective of art history that reveals how the spatial arrangement in religious art visualizes the Mu chieftains' strategic planning in frontier governance. It further argues that the Mu elites actively converted religious imagery into political agents, asserting cultural subjectivity amid overlapping Han and Tibetan influences. Methodologically, Wu Hung's *Spatial Dunhuang: Experiencing the Mogao Caves* (Wu 2022) provides key inspiration for this study. His spatial analysis approach examines the interplay between architectural structure and mural imagery, emphasizing spatial context while integrating iconology, formal analysis, and textual in-

terpretation. This interdisciplinary framework is particularly suitable for analyzing the Dabaoji Palace as a ritual space whose spatial layout and mural program are imbued with religious symbolism and political intent. Approaching from this perspective, this study investigates the arrangement of religious iconography in relation to architectural space to reveal its latent political-cultural narratives.

2. The Spatial Configuration of the Dabaoji Palace Murals and the Mu Chieftains' Political-Cultural Strategy

The murals of Dabaoji Palace, preserved in relatively good condition, offer invaluable material evidence of the early interplay among Han Chinese, Tibetan, and Naxi cultures in northwest Yunnan during the Ming dynasty. Twelve extant murals remain distributed across the south, west, and north interior walls of the palace, as well as the central altar screen; notably, eight of these contain Tibetan inscriptions. Debreczeny (2009) identified a dual iconographic structure within the mural program, with Han Buddhism represented at the front of the hall and Tibetan Buddhism at the rear. Building on this foundation, this study proposes a more nuanced tripartite spatial model based on mural placement, iconographic content, inscriptional evidence, and historical context: a Daoist space near the eastern entrance, a centrally located hybrid space dominated by Han Buddhist imagery, and a Tibetan esoteric sanctum situated at the western terminus (Figure 2).

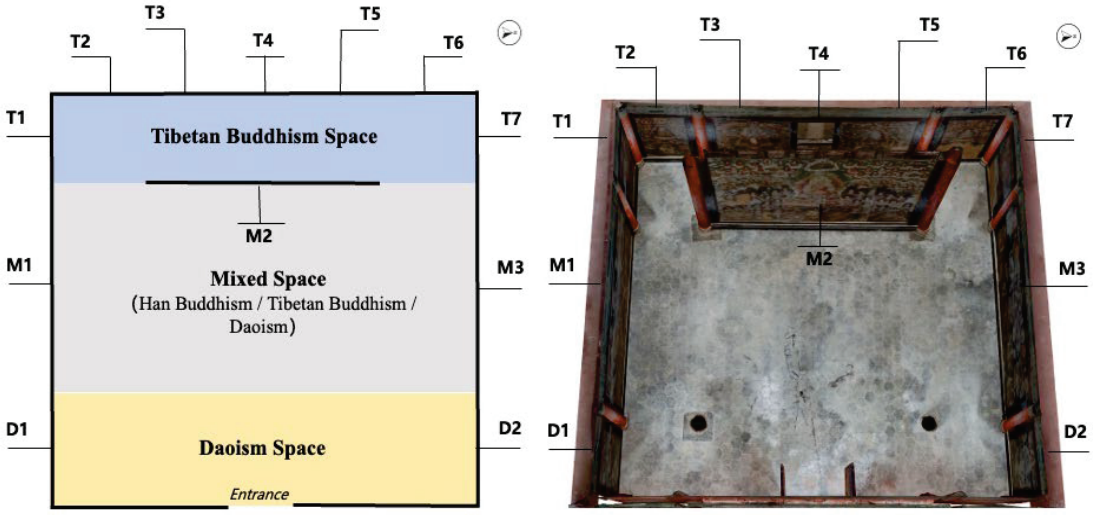

Figure 2. Spatial layout of Dabaoji Palace.

The core question addressed here is whether, despite the absence of physical partitions, this spatial model constitutes a ritual sequence underpinned by hierarchical order. More critically, how does this spatial logic reflect the Mu chieftains' strategic approach to frontier governance and cultural positioning within the Ming imperial framework? Given that religious imagery must be situated within its original context of architectural setting, religious practices, social ideology, and political agendas (Wu 2022), this paper contends that the Dabaoji murals should be read in relation to the Mu chieftains' frontier governance strategies to fully understand the deeper logic of their spatial layout.

2.1. Entrance—The Introductory Space of Daoism

The murals in the eastern entrance zone—*Marīcī* (D1) on the south wall and The *Three Officials of Heaven, Earth, and Water* (*tiandi shui sanguan*, D2) on the corresponding north wall—constitute the Daoist-themed, Han-style facade of Dabaoji Palace (Figure 3). Situated at the forefront of the hall, this space functions as a ritual threshold, enacting the visual narrative of Han propriety (*hanli* 汉礼) and introducing visitors into a sacred envi-

ronment. The rise of Daoism in Ming-dynasty Lijiang was closely linked to the influx of Han cultural influence and the Ming court's frontier policy. Although the regional chieftain system preserved local autonomy by ruling according to local customs, it operated simultaneously with the imperial agenda of transforming frontier civilizations through Han cultural values characterized by Confucian teachings (N. Wang 2021). As a core component of Han culture, Daoism provided a channel for the Naxi elite to engage in imperial ideology while navigating their own cultural identity.

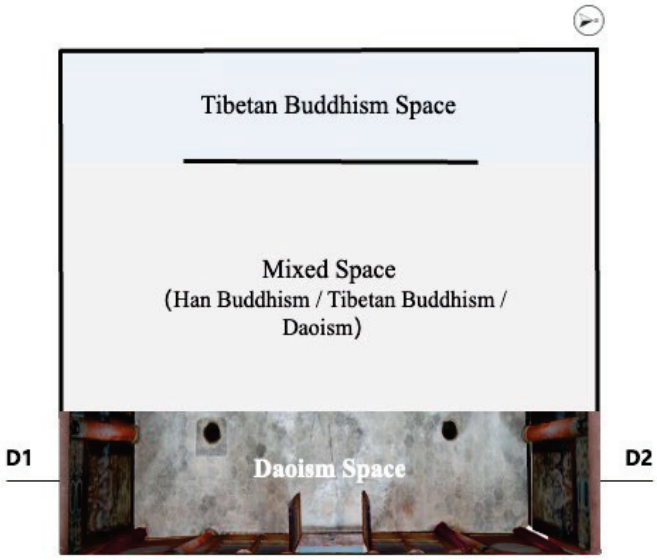

Figure 3. Daoism space.

Among the Mu chieftains, Mu Gong and Mu Zeng demonstrated deep personal and political devotions in Daoist practice. Their commitment extended from Daoist alchemy and poetry to aspirations for immortality, while also manifesting in temple patronage and public rituals aimed at securing cosmic order and imperial prosperity (N. Wang 2021). The Daoist space of Dabaoji Palace thus reflects not only spiritual devotion but also strategic engagement with Ming statecraft, establishing a visual declaration of the Mu's allegiance to Ming authority and alignment with Han traditions. The iconography of the Daoist murals also illustrates how the Mu chieftains actively integrated Daoism into the local Naxi cultural environment and their intermediary role between local society and the imperial state.

As shown in Figure 4, the central deity of mural D1 is identified by its inscription as the Tibetan deity *Mārīcī* (Xiong et al. 2013). However, iconographic evidence suggests a more accurate identification as *Doumu Yuanjun*, the Daoist Mother of the Big Dipper, based on the surrounding Daoist figures (P. Yan 2023). Beneath her are the Four Thunder Generals of Deng, Xin, Zhang, and Tao, who serve under her command and symbolically represent the Mu chieftains' military authority sanctioned by the Ming court for guarding the Sino-Tibetan frontier. Above her, the Heavenly Lord of Dao and its Virtue (*Daode Tianzun* 道德天尊), one of the Daoist Three Pure Ones, occupies the top central position, flanked by the Four Heavenly Ministers (*Siyu* 四御), high-ranking Daoist deities serving directly under the Three Pure Ones. This celestial hierarchy visually encodes the Mu chieftains' political role as regional governors within the Ming imperial structure, projecting their identity as loyal frontier agents through Daoist cosmology and iconographic symbolism.

Figure 4. Mārīcī (D1).

In mural D2 (Figure 5), the *Three Officials of Heaven, Earth, and Water*, the top central figure presents the Heavenly Lord of Spiritual Treasures (*Lingbao Tianzun* 灵宝天尊), whose elevated position parallels that of Daode Tianzun in mural D1, together articulating the Mu chieftains' aspirations for transcendence, longevity, and harmony through Daoist cosmology. To his left appears *Wenchang Dijun* (文昌帝君), the God of Culture and Literature, which is associated with the Mu family's promotion of Confucian learning; to his right is *Zhenwu Dadi* (真武大帝), the God of True Valiance, whose martial associations reference the Mu chieftains' campaigns against Tibetan polities and their defense of the northwest Yunnan frontier (An 2014). As N. Wang (2021) notes, *Zhenwu* also connoted unwavering loyalty to the empire, further supporting the Mu's image as devoted vassals of the Ming. The triad of the Three Officials and the thunder gods arrayed below them address popular concerns for prosperity, weather regulation, and protection from calamities (P. Yan 2023). Notably, the attire of the divine figures visually encodes political status. The Three Officials and their attendants are dressed in zuoren (左衽) left-lapel robes commonly associated with local Naxi elites, while Lingbao Tianzun wears a youren (右衽) right-lapel robe, symbolizing Han Chinese and imperial authority (P. Yan 2023). This contrast in attire and divine ranking highlights the Mu chieftains' intermediary role between indigenous identity and imperial loyalty.

Similarly to Clunas (2004) concept of "visibility strategy," the Daoist imagery at the palace entrance functions as a politically charged visual rhetoric through which the Mu family constructs its political, social, and cultural status as frontier elites within the Han cultural sphere, expressing fidelity to the Ming court while reinforcing local authority. By appropriating figures such as *Wenchang* and *Zhenwu*, the Mu chieftains reframed Daoist deities as proxies for Confucian virtue, aligning themselves with the ideologies of the Ming empire. As a spatial and ritual threshold, the Daoist ensemble at the palace entrance constructs a distinctive Han-style facade that performs both ritual and ideological functions.

It marks the initial transition from secular to sacred space while visually declaring the Mu chieftains' cultural and political stance. Positioned within the Ming dynasty's broader civilizing campaign of *yong xia bian yi* (用夏变夷, "transforming the ethnic minorities through Chinese values"), this Daoist facade functions as a public-facing proclamation of the Mu chieftains' identification with Han Chinese values while simultaneously asserting their status as recognized frontier rulers. As the "opening stage" within the palace's spatial narrative, it establishes the tone for the entire visual program. Through carefully curated Han cultural norms and imperial symbology, the Daoist space constructs a narrative of political legitimacy and cultural sophistication central to the Mu chieftains' self-representation.

Figure 5. Three Officials of Heaven, Earth, and Water (D2).

2.2. Central Zone: A Syncretic Space Dominated by Han Buddhism

Following the establishment of a Han-style Daoist facade, mural M2 on the central screen wall (originally the back screen of a now-lost Buddhist altar) draws viewers' attention towards the palace's main hall, a syncretic space largely shaped by Han Buddhist visual culture. This central zone reflects the Mu chieftains' visual strategy of multi-religious coexistence to assert local agency beyond passive assimilation into the imperial order. Occupying the most prominent position within the hall, the area comprises three murals: *The Assembly of Śākyamuni Buddha* (M2) on the screen wall, *The Mahāmāyūrī Water-Land Assemblage* (M1) on the south wall, and Scenes from the Guanyin Pumen (M3) on the north wall (Figure 6). Though all three reflect Han Buddhist esthetics and liturgical themes, they also incorporate Tibetan and Daoist elements, forming a visually cohesive syncretic space predominated by Han religious idioms.

Figure 6. Mixed space.

Situated at the intersection of Han and Tibetan cultural spheres, Lijiang provided fertile ground for the Mu chieftains' pluralistic religious policy. Their patronage extended from major Tibetan Kagyü monasteries to Han Buddhist temples such as Liuli Hall and Xitan Temple, while local ritual life encompassed both Daoist Star Worship rites (*Chaodouhui* 朝斗会) and Buddhist Maitreya Assemblies (*Milao Hui* 弥老会). Large-scale rituals often involved Daoist priests, Tibetan lamas, and Naxi Dongba shamans performing jointly (F. Yang 1996). The *Dangmeikongpu* (当美空普) ritual, translated as "Opening the Gate of the Dabaoji Palace in Baisha", suggests that Dabaoji Palace likely functioned as a site for such multi-religious rites (F. Yang 1996).

In *The Mahāmāyūrī Assemblage* (M1, Figure 7), the central deity is identified by inscription as the Tibetan *Mahāmāyūrī* (Xiong et al. 2013), also venerated as the Great Peacock King in Han Buddhism. While her iconography—three heads, eight arms, tantric implements—derives from Tibetan esoteric norms,[1] it also conforms to Chinese representations: a compassionate bodhisattva-like feminine form on a lotus throne upheld by a spreading peacock, consistent with Tang-style Chinese representations in the *Mahāmāyūrī Vidyārājñī Sūtra* translated by Amoghavajra (Chai 2023). She forms a triadic composition with the two attendant bodhisattvas below her, echoing traditional Chinese Buddhist assembly formats (Liao 2010). This composition embodies Mahāyāna Buddhism ideals of salvation and is closely associated with Han Chinese rituals of dragon worship, avoidance of calamities, and prayer for rain (Chai 2023).

The surrounding pantheon, featuring nearly 100 deities including the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, the Twenty-Eight Mansions (*Ershiba Xiu* 二十八宿), thunder gods, earth deities, Sixteen Arhats, and the Four Heavenly Kings, embodies classic Han cosmology. As Debreczeny (2009) mentions, the composition resembles Water-Land Ritual (*shuilu fahui* 水陆法会) paintings prevalent in late-Ming Buddhist temples. The genre can be traced back to Emperor Liang Wudi's repentance ritual and Tang esoteric manuals, codified during the Song dynasty in Yang E's Shuilu Yi, and later became central to Chinese liturgical representations (Zhou 2006; Dai 2008). The visual integration of Daoist, Buddhist, and popular Chinese folk deities in *shuilu fahui* responds to common worldly prayers for protection from calamities (Q. Liu 2021), aligning the Mu chieftains with Ming state rituals and projecting their agency as frontier stabilizers during periods of crisis.

Figure 7. Mahāmāyūrī in *Shuilu* Assemblage (M1).

Importantly, while the *Mahāmāyūrī Assembly* retains Han stylistic conventions, it tactically incorporates Tibetan elements in a less prominent position. For example, her mandala appears only as a miniature beneath her seat rather than dominating the composition as seen in traditional Tibetan thangkas. Through a visual hierarchy that prioritizes Han Buddhist conventions with a controlled amount of Tibetan imagery, the Mu chieftains project themselves as governors of the Yunnan-Tibetan borders in accordance with Ming policies.

On the north wall, directly opposite to the *Mahāmāyūrī Water-Land Assemblage*, is *Scenes from the Guanyin Pumen* (M3, Figure 8), an illustrated episode from the *Lotus Sūtra* in which Avalokiteśvāra (*Guanyin* 观音), the Han bodhisattva of compassion, rescues sentient beings from various forms of suffering (Z. Yang 2018). The mural articulates the Mahāyāna Buddhist ideal of universal salvation and reflects Guanyin's central role in Han Buddhist devotional practice. The juxtaposition of *Mahāmāyūrī* and *Guanyin* echoes the established traditions both in state ritual and popular worship, where the two sutras were venerated as core texts of Han esoteric Buddhism (Y. Yan 2006). On the top layer are the Ten Manifestations of Avalokiteśvāra, and the Four Heavenly Kings occupy the bottom corners as standard iconographic features in Chinese Buddhist art. Applying the style of *jingbian* 经变 (sutra transformation tableaux) paintings, the mural arranges different narrative episodes in a symmetrical zigzag composition around the central figure, a typical visual narrative structure in Chinese pictorial exegesis (Lin 2012). The tableau not only demonstrates the prominence of Han Buddhist visual traditions but also reinforces the Mu chieftains' alignment with widely accepted liturgical and iconographic forms in Chinese Buddhism.

On the central screen wall is the *Assembly of Śākyamuni Buddha* (M2, Figure 9),[2] which bears no Tibetan inscriptions. Its theme derives from the Assembly of Amitayus (Buddha of Immeasurable Life) in the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, depicting Śākyamuni preaching to a large divine assembly. The main figure of Śākyamuni appears in a red kasaya adorned with golden floral scrolls, a traditional Chinese pattern design indicating clear influence from Ming imperial Buddhist art. Above him, three rows of small Buddhas represent the Thirty-Five Buddhas of Repentance and one Śākyamuni, conforming to the "thousand-Buddha" iconographic convention found in Chinese Buddhist cave temples and mural programs (S. Wang 2022). The middle register presents bodhisattvas and Daoist deities; the bottom includes three Tibetan wrathful deities, with Mahākāla directly beneath Śākyamuni and the Four Heavenly Kings at the corners. This layered ensemble situates the mural as the visual center of the syncretic space, embedding Chinese Buddhist narrative structures and esthetics at the heart of the hall's religious

topography. It articulates the Mu chieftains' inclusive strategy of aligning with Ming imperial authority while acknowledging their role as Tibetan frontier governors.

Figure 8. Scenes from the *Guanyin Pumen* (M2).

Figure 9. Assembly of Śākyamuni Buddha (M3).

Originally positioned behind a now-lost central altar, the mural once formed a backdrop for the central Buddhist statuary. Its role is similar to the rear screen of the central altar in a typical Mogao Cave, which brings the object of worship from the rear to the center of the religious space (Wu 2022). Despite the altar's absence, the mural remains as the hall's undisputed focal point, drawing the viewer's gaze to the central elevated image of Śākyamuni immediately upon entry. As a spatial partition, it reshapes the hall's internal hierarchy and reinforces its symmetrical axis, visually conferring an emperor-like presence

upon the central Buddha. While incorporating deities from Han Buddhism, Daoism, and Tibetan Buddhism, the mural stylistically fuses the line techniques and esthetic features of Ming court-style figure paintings represented by the murals of Fahai Temple in Beijing, including its application of the "Eighteen Modes of Brushwork," phoenix coronets (*Feng Guan* 凤冠) worn by noblewomen, courtly robes (*chaofu* 朝服), and the *Liang Guan* 梁冠 of Ming officials (S. Liu 2021). Meanwhile, the mural's overall hierarchical composition assembles the layout of Three Realms in Tibetan thangkas (Xie 2004). The fusion of Han and Tibetan Buddhist visual traditions articulates the Mu chieftains' inclusive strategy of aligning with Ming imperial authority while acknowledging their role as Tibetan frontier governors, reinforcing their role as active curators of a pluralistic religious program.

As shown in Figure 10, Han Buddhist and Daoist deities dominate the composition in terms of quantity and hierarchy, while only three Tibetan Dharmapālas appear beneath Śākyamuni as protector deities. The central Śākyamuni Buddha adheres to Han Buddhist iconography, with an *uṣṇīṣa* and plain *kasaya* without jewelry decorations, distinguishing him from the Tibetan mode. This Han-dominated visual emphasis aligns with Naxi's political developments in the early Ming: following the conquest of Tibet and Yunnan, the Naxi leader submitted to the Ming and was granted the hereditary title "Mu" as the native chieftain of Lijiang (Xiong 2006). Under Ming frontier policy, the Mu's authority expanded into historically Tibetan regions, including Diqing, Nujiang, and Batang (Xiong 2006). Their legitimacy was further solidified through military service to the court, including suppression of rebellions and defense against Tibetan incursions (N. Wang 2021).

Figure 10. M2 deity distribution, drawing by author.

Interestingly, the inclusion of Tibetan Dharmapālas beneath Śākyamuni does not merely illustrate a hierarchical arrangement but instead creates a visual *third space*[3], a deliberate cultural hybrid that resists assimilation into either Han or Tibetan models but transcends both. Rather than submitting to a single tradition, this creative juxtaposition suggests a new paradigm that asserts the Mu chieftains' local agency and authority in negotiating imperial and frontier identities. The mural thus embodies their core political-religious strategy of affirming clear allegiance to the Ming court while signaling effective governance over Tibetan regions. While the Mu chieftains were officially Ming subjects, they operated as semi-autonomous vassals, managing regional affairs, offering tributes, and contributing militarily. The *Assembly of Śākyamuni* visually enacts this dual identity

by integrating Tibetan esoteric elements into a Han Buddhist framework, projecting a localized mode of authority within the imperial order.

These three largest, most elaborately executed murals occupy the most prominent position within Dabaoji Palace and concentrate the richest category of religious iconography, establishing the central hybrid space as both the ritual center and the prominent symbol of political authority. Reflecting the pluralistic religious environment of Naxi society, it concentrates on the Mu family's sophisticated frontier strategy as a coherent visual program. As the centerpiece, the *Assembly of Śākyamuni Buddha* is organized within a Han Buddhist visual framework and serves as the focal point of the mural program. The predominance of Han Buddhist and Daoist deities across all three murals articulates the Mu chieftains' identification with Ming authority and their alignment with the empire's frontier cultural policies. Meanwhile, the selective incorporation of Tibetan esoteric elements indicates their role as imperial agents in managing Tibetan affairs. Through a deliberate balance of religious iconographies, the Mu chieftains crafted a space that reaffirms their allegiance to the Ming imperial court while asserting their delegated authority over Tibetan regions.

The central motifs of the ceiling's caisson design (Figure 11) embody a symbolic convergence of Tibetan and Daoist cosmologies. Specifically, the integration of the Tibetan Buddhist motif of *rnam bcu dbang ldan* (the design of Gathering Ten Powerful Elements) and the Daoist *Bagua* 八卦 diagram within the caisson's core visual schema serves as an emblem of Han-Tibetan cosmological synthesis (Mu 2020). This deliberate juxtaposition visually enacts a syncretic worldview wherein differing religious cosmologies are harmonized within a unified sacred space.

Figure 11. Central motif of the caisson ceiling design[4].

The central space thus exemplifies a multi-religious ritual field anchored by Han Buddhism while tactically integrating Daoist and Tibetan visual elements. This results in a visually unified program that reinforces the Mu chieftains' identity as both loyal representatives of imperial agents and active mediators at the Ming frontier, projecting subjectivity through articulating a distinctive political-religious discourse that bridges imperial authority, Tibetan religious polities, and Naxi local governance. Its strategic location and artistic sophistication position it as the highest symbolic tier within Dabaoji Palace's spatial and ideological hierarchy.

2.3. Back Zone: The Sacred Space of Tibetan Buddhism

Behind the central screen wall lies the innermost sanctum of Dabaoji Palace. Physically shielded from immediate view, this dimly lit and enclosed area forms a secluded space devoted to Tibetan tantric Buddhism. It comprises five surviving panels on the west wall and two panels at the western ends of the south and north walls (Figure 12). According to Debreczeny (2009), the west wall murals, from left to right, include Vajrasattva (T2), the *Mahāmudrā Lineage* (T3), *Vajradhara Surrounded by Eighty-Four Mahāsiddhas* (T5), and *Vajravidāraṇa* (T6), while the central panel (T4) is now lost. The south wall's westernmost mural (T1) features *Mahākaruṇika Jinasāgara*, while its northern counterpart (T7) depicts *Vajravārāhī as Vajrayoginī* (Debreczeny 2009). The esoteric deities depicted on the walls and their compositional arrangements are in line with the Karma Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism, affirming the Mu chieftains' religious status as the major Kagyü patron and thereby legitimizing their authority over Tibetan regions.

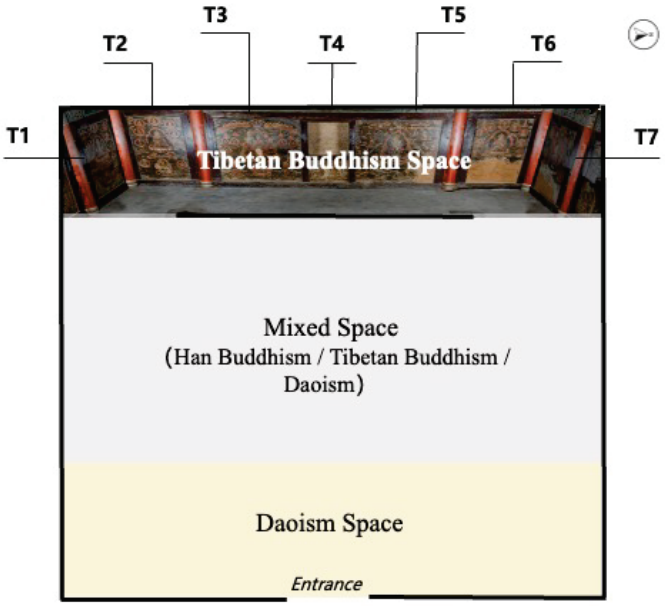

Figure 12. Tibetan Buddhism space.

The physical characteristics of this space and the murals' iconographic content evoke the secrecy and sanctity necessary for tantric rituals, suggesting that the space may have served specific meditative functions for Kagyü masters or members of the Mu lineage. Yet beyond its religious purpose, this realm holds significant political intent through its presentation of a systematic visual lineage of Indian and Tibetan Kagyü masters, authorizing the Karma Kagyü tradition in Lijiang and thereby reinforcing the Mu chieftains' religious status and political role as imperial agents of Tibetan affairs.

The strategic alliance between the Mu chieftains of Ming-dynasty Lijiang and the Karma Kagyü lineage of Tibetan Buddhism was rooted in geographic proximity and sustained religious-cultural exchange. Since the time of the Second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi (1204–1283), the Black Hat Karmapas had established monasteries and disseminated teachings across Kham. This alliance was solidified in 1516, when the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje (1507–1554), was invited to Lijiang by Mu Ding (Feng 2008). The grand reception for his arrival marked the Mu chieftains' official adoption of the Karma Kagyü tradition. The relationship culminated in 1623 with the completion of the Lijiang edition of the *Kangyur*, the Tibetan Buddhist canon, sponsored by Mu Zeng and supervised by the Sixth Red Hat Karmapa, Chökyi Wangchuk (1584–1635) (Feng 2008). From the Wanli period onward, the Mu family actively sponsored Kagyü monasteries and invited prominent lamas to teach

locally. Among these acts of patronage, the murals of Dabaoji Palace visually assert the Mu chieftains' alliance with the Karma Kagyü lineage, hence their religious-political legitimacy in Tibetan governance.

The mural *Mahākaruṇika Jinasāgara* (T1, Figure 13) exemplifies this alliance through a sacred hierarchy centered on Kagyü spiritual lineage. At the center sits Mahākaruṇika Jinasāgara (the Great Compassionate Avalokiteśvāra of the Buddha Ocean), a principal tantric deity embodying compassion, particularly venerated by the Karma Kagyü. Above are three Indian masters: Tipupa (center), Padampa Gyagar (founder of the Zhijepa order, left), and his disciple Machik Labdrön (right). Below them appear Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (founder of the Kagyü school, left) and Rechungpa (disciple of Milarepa, right). Flanking the central deity are two esoteric *Yidams*: Hayagrīva (left), identifiable by a horse head emerging from his hair (Debreczeny 2009), and a four-armed wrathful form of Guhya-jñānādākinī (right), the Secret Wisdom Ḍākinī. Below the central figure are a series of worldly protector deities and warriors: directly beneath stands the Brahmin Guardian of Virtue, father of Vaiśravaṇa (guardian king of wealth), flanked by eleven mounted warriors including Vaiśravaṇa, the Eight Horse Lords (his attendants), and local road and livestock guardian gods (Xiong 2006). As seen in Figure 14, this vertical arrangement visually legitimizes the Kagyü transmission in Lijiang by aligning Indian masters with Tibetan transmitters. Meanwhile, the inclusion of worldly protectors likely reflects the Mu chieftains' pragmatic concerns in regional security and economic prosperity, such as securing trade routes, including the local Tea-Horse Road.

Figure 13. Mahākaruṇika Jinasāgara (T1).

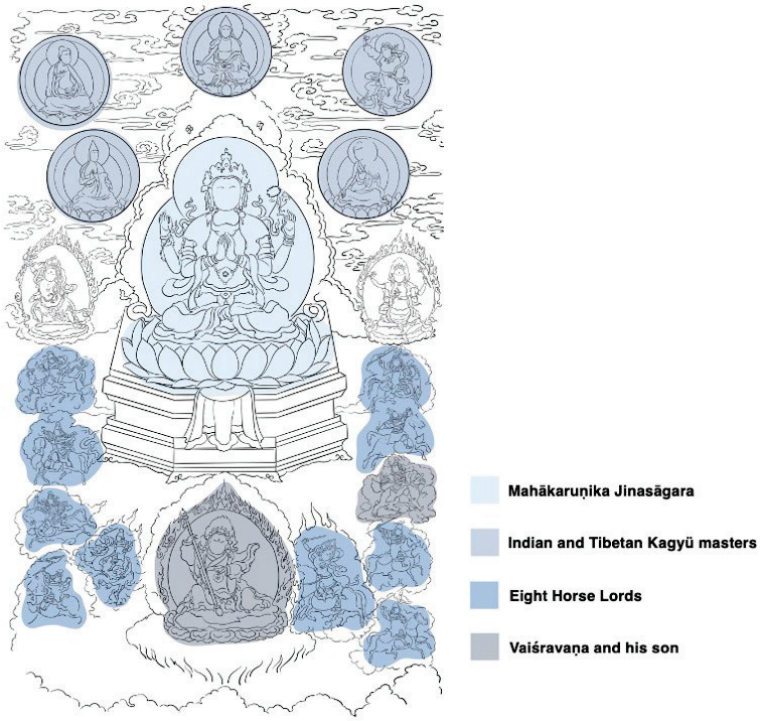

Figure 14. T1 deity distribution, drawing by author.

The ancient Tea-Horse Road extended from tea-producing regions in southern Yunnan through Dali, Lijiang, and Diqing, reaching central Tibet and even parts of South Asia, traversing high-altitude and mountainous terrain. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Mu chieftains' inclusive frontier policies transformed the road into both a thriving trade artery and a conduit for multiethnic cultural exchange (Li 2017). Their strategy of "governing Tibet through tea exchange (*yi cha yu fan* 以茶驭番)" effectively restrained Mongol expansion into Tibetan regions and secured key strongholds along the route, positioning Lijiang as a crucial nexus linking Tibetan and Han Chinese spheres. Moreover, their integration of Tibet-Yunnan commercial trade into the Ming economy strengthened imperial cavalry with Tibetan warhorses and encouraged silver inflows via expanded Yunnan tea exports (Xu 2020).

The mural's juxtaposition of Indian masters and Tibetan translators visually affirms Karma Kagyü religious authority within Mu-governed territories, while its combination of esoteric and local protectors reflects the local trade environment. This iconographic program highlights the Mu chieftains' dual function as imperial frontier agents: safeguarding regional stability and fostering economic development and intercultural exchange along the Tea-Horse Road.

The first mural on the west wall depicts Vajrasattva and the Five Wisdom Buddhas (T2, Figure 15). At the center, Vajrasattva embodies the primordial source of Tibetan tantric teachings (Xiong et al. 2013). He is surrounded by Bhaiṣajyaguru (the Medicine Buddha), a smaller emanation of Vajrasattva, and the Five Wisdom Buddhas in the tantric system—Vairocana at the top center, with probable depictions of Akṣobhya (east) and Amitābha (west, inscriptions obscured), Ratnasambhava (south), and Amoghasiddhi (north). Below the central deity stands Vaiśravaṇa (also seen in T1), flanked by Sūryaprabha and Candraprabha, bodhisattvas of sunlight and moonlight (Xiong et al. 2013). Vaiśravaṇa appears unarmored with his white lion mount holding treasure in its mouth, an image potentially reflecting the Mu chieftains' aspiration for prosperity and Lijiang's position as a flourishing trade hub during the Ming era. Notably, the triadic grouping of Bhaiṣajyaguru, Sūryaprabha, and Candraprabha originates in Han Chinese esoteric iconography (as seen

in the Bhaiṣajyaguru assembly at Liuli Hall wherein all murals are purely Han-style), yet it is recontextualized here within a Tibetan tantric framework (Figure 16). This deliberate synthesis embodies the Mu chieftains' visual strategy of negotiating Han and Tibetan religious-cultural paradigms.

Figure 15. Vajrasattva (T2).

The adjacent mural, *Mahāmudrā Lineage* (T3, Figure 17), establishes the orthodoxy of the Karma Kagyü school through a structured hierarchy of Indian and Tibetan lineage holders, asserting its status as the preeminent Tibetan Buddhist sect in Lijiang. Centered at the base is Mahākāla, the wrathful protector deity of the Kagyü tradition (Debreczeny 2009), whose fierce form underscores the sanctity and defensive power of the lineage. Debreczeny et al. (2012), in his study of the Tenth Karmapa Chöying Dorje's exile to Lijiang in 1647 (driven by pressure from the Geluk school in Tibet), identifies him as the mural's central figure and suggests that he may have personally overseen its creation. The mural's prominent depiction of the Tenth Karmapa reaffirmed the Mu chieftains 'patronage and provision of sanctuary for the Karma Kagyü lineage, reinforcing its religious prestige across Tibetan regions. The Tenth Karmapa is also enthroned upon a Han Chinese-style seat adorned with six dragons, a motif invoking his title "Great Precious Dharma King" (*Da Bao Fawang* 大宝法王), which was officially conferred by the Ming court. This iconographic element reflects the Mu chieftains' integration of Ming imperial symbolism and alignment with Ming political ideology, highlighting their role as intermediaries between central authority and Tibetan religious networks.

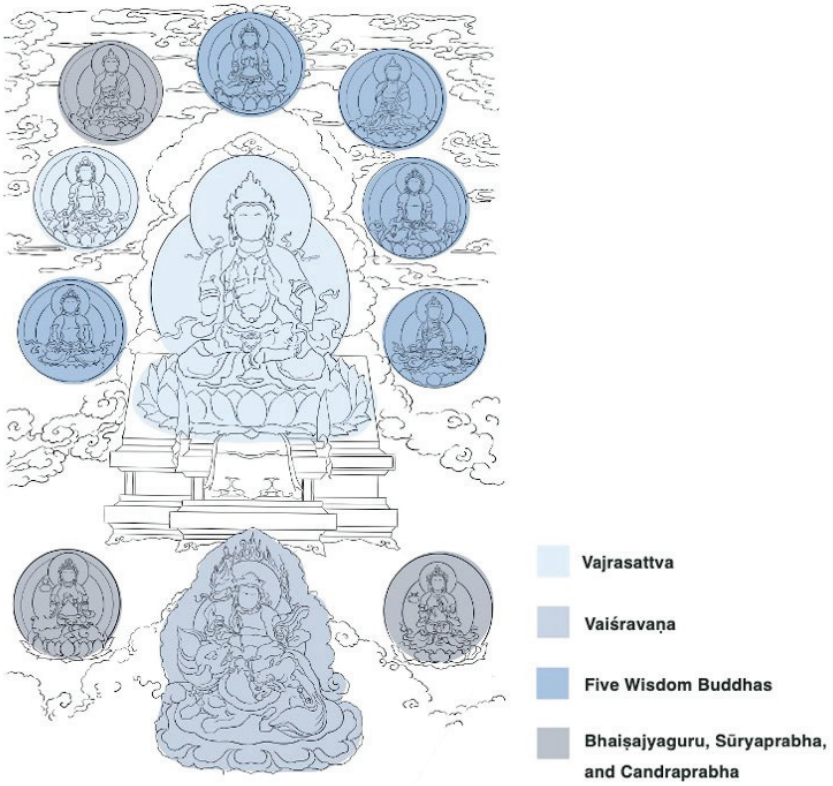

Figure 16. T2 deity distribution, drawing by author.

Figure 17. Mahāmudrā Lineage (T3).

The third surviving mural on the west wall (T5, Figure 18), *Vajradhara and the Eighty-Four Mahāsiddhas*, intensifies the focus on Karma Kagyü transmission. Vajradhara, regarded as the primordial source of Mahāmudrā teachings, presides at the center, encircled by tiered rows of eighty-four Indian siddhas, including Nāgārjuna, Nāropa, and Saraha (Xiong et al. 2013). These figures collectively construct a visual lineage of spiritual attainment revered by Karma Kagyü practitioners, who emphasize meditation (Debreczeny 2009). This iconographic program visually affirms the sect's doctrinal orthodoxy and un-

derscores the religious legitimacy of the Mu chieftains' patronage by linking the esoteric lineage to its Indian origins.

Figure 18. Vajradhara Surrounded by Eighty-four Mahāsiddhas (T5).

The final mural on the west wall, *Vajravidāraṇa* (T6, Figure 19), features twelve tantric deities. The central figure, likely Vajravidāraṇa, is a major purificatory deity within the tantric tradition (Xiong et al. 2013). Vajradhara appears again at the top center, affirming the root of the Kagyü lineage. To Vajradhara's left sits the female deity Usṇīṣavijayā, distinguished by three faces and eight arms (Xiong et al. 2013). Surrounding them are eight wrathful guardian figures, reinforcing the protective functions of the composition. The north wall's western section continues the esoteric sequence with *Vajravārahī as Vajrayoginī* (T7, Figure 20), a fierce female tantric deity central to advanced meditative practices, affirming the ritual depth of the palace's inner sanctum.

The murals in the rear section of the hall establish an intentionally enclosed sacred realm centered on the Karma Kagyü lineage and spiritual attainment. This esoteric spatial configuration reinforces the authority of the Karma Kagyü school in its practice and transmission while legitimizing the Mu chieftains' rule through visual alignment with a prestigious religious tradition. This contrasts significantly with the central hybrid, public-facing space anchored by the *Assembly of Śākyamuni Buddha*, where both Han and Tibetan visual elements are integrated to project an inclusive ritual environment accessible to diverse audiences, including Ming officials, Tibetan practitioners, and Naxi elites. While the rear sanctum likely served private ritual or meditative purposes, the central space, through its visual inclusivity and prominent location, becomes the primary stage to express the Mu chieftains' political-religious strategy and showcase their creative agency as frontier governors. Such spatial and visual deviations reveal the Mu chieftains' sophisticated role as local intermediaries between regional and central powers. Their religious patronage not only bolstered Karma Kagyü institutional presence but also aligned with Ming imperial policies for managing Tibet.

By forming religious and political allegiance with Tibetan Buddhism, the Mu chieftains contributed significantly to stabilizing the Sino-Tibetan frontier, promoting cultural exchange, and integrating local economies into the empire's trade networks. These efforts demonstrated their role in fostering a pluralistic cultural landscape that balanced Han, Ti-

betan, and local interests while adhering to the broader strategic objectives of the Ming court. In this way, the Mu chieftains exemplified a mode of frontier governance that reconciled regional autonomy with imperial solidarity.

Figure 19. Vajravidāraṇa (T6).

Figure 20. Vajravārāhī Vajrayoginī (T7).

3. Conclusions

Through a comprehensive analysis of the tripartite spatial structure of the murals at Dabaoji Palace, this study demonstrates how spatial arrangement articulates a coherent

political-cultural sequence: from the Daoist facade at the entrance (a declaration of Han allegiance), through a central space of Han-Tibetan integration (the core of political-cultural strategy), to the tantric sanctum at the rear (a reinforcement through sacred empowerment). This structure frames the murals not merely as religious displays, but as a visual mechanism of frontier governance devised by the Mu chieftains, restoring the narrative agency of religious art within the frontier context. The murals translate the Mu chieftains' strategies and identity negotiations into spatial and iconographic terms, visually affirming their political and cultural agency in reinforcing ties with the Ming center and legitimizing their local rule. In doing so, they helped reshape the socio-political landscape of northwest Yunnan, contributing to its integration within the late imperial Chinese polity (J. Yang 2022).

Despite the single-hall structure of Dabaoji Palace, the murals construct an internal spatial hierarchy grounded in the Mu chieftains' religious-political vision. In the progression from east to west, the Daoist zone affirms allegiance to the Ming and forms the ideological foundation. The central hybrid zone, dominated by Han iconography yet interwoven with Tibetan elements, anchors the hall's visual and ritual focus. It asserts the Mu chieftains' legitimacy as both imperial vassals and autonomous local agents mediating Han-Tibetan interactions. The tantric rear sanctum invokes Karma Kagyü authority to reinforce their governance in Tibetan regions and align with imperial interests. Functionally, the Daoist facade also marks the transition from secular to sacred, while the central hybrid zone serves both as a core and as a transition from a Han-dominated ritual environment to the innermost esoteric sanctum.

These functional differences define the narrative weight of each space. The central hybrid zone, with its prominent position and capacity to integrate cross-cultural iconography, emerges as the principal stage for articulating the Mu chieftains' political-religious strategy. The configuration of Han-style deities enveloping wrathful Tibetan protectors in the *Assembly of Śākyamuni Buddha* encapsulates their strategy of frontier governance aligned with imperial administration. The juxtaposition of the *rnam bcu dbang ldan* and the *Bagua* diagram at the mural program's architectural and symbolic apex reinforces the Mu chieftains' strategic deployment of religious imagery, underscoring their role as cultural mediators who actively synthesized Han and Tibetan ideological systems to reinforce their authority within the Ming frontier context. This hybrid zone reflects the Mu chieftains' active agency in curating iconographic combinations, rather than passively receiving external religious forms. In fact, no single tradition—Han Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, or local Naxi religion—held autonomous political power during the Mu regime. Rather, all were integrated within an inclusive cultural system under Mu authority (F. Yang 1996). The central space thus emerges as a *middle ground*[5] of cultural negotiation, providing a critical lens for reassessing the center-periphery dynamics in Chinese art history.

In historical terms, the Mu chieftains' mediation between Han and Tibetan spheres redefined Lijiang from a historically marginalized region into a multicultural nexus in the Ming era. As frontier agents for nearly five centuries, the Mu family preserved regional stability and promoted cross-cultural dialog, fostering a cultural and epistemic foundation upon which frontier communities integrated into a shared national identity while retaining localized traditions. This process, which was later formalized during the Qing dynasty, found its visual precedent in the mural program of Dabaoji Palace. The tripartite spatial model within the Dabaoji Palace embodies the agency of frontier communities amid historical currents in the creation of a cultural identity, offering critical insights into late imperial center-frontier dynamics.

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Notes

1 The Sanskrit text *Sādhanamālā* records an image of the three-faced, eight-armed Peacock Wisdom King (*Mahāmayūrī*): in the right hands are held a peacock feather, an arrow, in a varadamudra gesture, and a sword; in the left hands are a bowl containing the image of a monk, a bow, and—resting on the thigh—a hand supporting a treasure vase containing a flaming jewel; another hand holds a multicolored vajra adorned with jeweled streamers and banners. See: Jia (2015, p. 17).

2 This mural was also named *Tathāgata Refuge Field* by Debreczeny (2009).

3 According to Homi K. Bhabha, the *Third Space* is an ambiguous, hybrid zone that dismantles binary identities and allows new cultural meanings to emerge—ones that are neither wholly one culture nor another (see *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha 1994).

4 See H. Wang (2002) and the extensive bibliography there.

5 See B. Yang (2023, pp. 209–13) and the extensive bibliography there.

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Article

Solvent Transfer and the Reimagining of Hell: Religious Narrative in Rauschenberg's *Inferno* Series

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Abstract: In an era of accelerating secularization, art serves as a vital mediator for non-institutional forms of spirituality. This article examines Robert Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series (1958–1960) as a case study of how modern art reconfigures religious narratives to engage with humanity's "ultimate concerns." Through his solvent transfer technique, Rauschenberg dismantles Dante's theological structure and reconfigures it into a fragmented, participatory experience of spirituality. The argument develops in two parts. First, it demonstrates how Rauschenberg secularizes sacred imagery to portray modern social realities as a "contemporary inferno" marked by systemic violence and commodified desire. Second, it theorizes that the materiality of solvent transfer—its blurring, erasure, and contingent traces—creates what may be called "material spirituality," a sacred presence perceived through absence and indexical trace. Within this reconfigured structure, spectatorship itself takes on a ritualistic character. When confronted with fragmented and unstable imagery, viewers engage in active, contemplative practice, transforming the act of viewing into a secular ritual of attentiveness. Thus, Rauschenberg's Inferno radically redefines the religious function of art—not as redemption, but as the cultivation of fragile yet enduring forms of spirituality within the estrangement of modern life.

Keywords: *Inferno* series; Robert Rauschenberg; religious narrative; spirituality; solvent transfer

1. Introduction

The Italian poet Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*, c. 1307–1321), written during his exile beginning around 1308, is widely recognized as one of the greatest achievements in world literature. This monumental poem creates a profound and enduring symbolic universe rooted in Christian theology. Through its three-part structure—*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*—it presents a theological worldview intertwined with late medieval eschatology and moral order (Barnes 2011, pp. 1–15).

The concept of Hell is a central tenet of Christian theology, inspiring countless portrayals as the antithesis of God's realm. Representations of Hell are associated with depictions of vices—specifically the seven deadly sins (anger, avarice, envy, gluttony, lust, pride, and sloth)—and with the devil, or Simia Dei (Cheney 2016, pp. 488–519). Most importantly, Hell is the place where damned souls are believed to reside after death. However, Christian canonical scripture offers no detailed description of Hell's location, shape, sensory attributes, or its malevolent inhabitants. In *Inferno*, Dante depicts Hell as the ultimate domain of excruciating pain and eternal punishment (Alighieri

and Singleton 1990, pp. 5–10). Upon entering the *Inferno*, Dante passes through an archway inscribed with the words: "Abandon all hope, you who enter here". Lucy Beckett observes, "What is shocking, of course, about Dante's hell is its finality. . .nothing here will ever change. Here there is no love for the loveless. . .no mercy for the eternally condemned" (Barnes 2011, pp. 1–15).

From Erwin Panofsky's iconological perspective, Dante's *Inferno* is a visual treasury rich in symbolic meaning. Through dramatic encounters, biblical typology, allegory, and complex metaphors, Dante renders theological concepts such as "sin," "punishment," and "despair and alienation" both concrete and visible (Fisher 2024, p. 2). These images form a coherent symbolic system that conveys doctrine and mirrors the journey of the individual soul. Interwoven with historical, mythological, and biblical figures, this system anchors abstract theological teachings in a concrete critique of Florentine society, revealing the cultural foundations of its iconography (Guénon 1925, pp. 24–28). More importantly, the narrative structure of the *Inferno* creates a ritualized imaginative space. Guided by Virgil (representing reason) and Beatrice (representing divine grace), Dante embarks on a spiritual journey from Hell, through Purgatory, to Paradise (Kleinhenz 1986, pp. 225–36). As Victor Turner and Hans Belting argue, this structure constitutes a "ritual space" (Karamipour and Salehi Ardakani 2015, pp. 79–98), following the logic of a religious rite of passage—from condemnation and purification to ultimate bliss. This structure provides readers with a contemplative experience that transcends physical space, enabling a symbolic transformation of the soul through the text.

Since its inception, The Divine *Inferno* has inspired countless visual interpretations. Sandro Botticelli's 92 drawings for The *Divine Comedy* have been especially praised for their beauty and sensitivity, offering a faithful visual rendering of the poem (Watts 1995, pp. 163–201). Doré Gustave's (Jelbert 2021, pp. 154–87) wood engravings—renowned for their dramatic force—became some of the most widely circulated visual renditions of the poem. William Blake's watercolor illustrations infused the text with anti-clerical emotional intensity (Burnside 2018, pp. 1–12). These artistic responses continuously reshape the perception and semantic space of Dante's text, attesting to the openness and vitality of its visual language.

This tradition of translating Dante's text into visual form set the stage for 20th-century reinterpretations. The 700th anniversary of his birth in 1965 became a pivotal moment, drawing responses from academia, the media, and cultural institutions in the United States. From university courses and *New York Times* features to the emergence of numerous non-academic Dante clubs, Dante emerged as a cultural icon within the realm of popular discourse (Mare 1965, p. 29). Against the backdrop of Cold War anxieties, spiritual crises, and growing secularization, his reflections on human suffering and despair gained renewed relevance (Mirzoeff 1999, p. 17). Robert Rauschenberg grew up in a fundamentalist Church of Christ family, and religious themes and imagery frequently appeared in his works from the late 1940s to the early 1950s (Duffy 1997, pp. 92–101). It was within this historical context that Robert Rauschenberg created his *Inferno* series (1958–1960), comprising thirty-four works corresponding to each canto of Dante's *Inferno*. Unlike his earlier and often controversial *Combines* (Folland 2010, pp. 348–65), this project was met with critical acclaim. In 1963, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York acquired the series, which was later published as a deluxe edition by Harry N. Abrams and toured internationally. The *Inferno* project marked a major turning point in Rauschenberg's career, signifying a shift from formal experimentation toward deeper explorations of history and spirituality.

Scholars have interpreted Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series from various perspectives. Auricchio (1997) analyzes its queer coding and strategies of covert expression through the

lens of metaphor and identity. Krauss focuses on its experimentation with media, particularly the innovations in image-making through solvent transfer techniques (Krauss 1999, pp. 86–116). Hiroko and Robert emphasize its allegorical reconstruction of contemporary American society (Hiroko and Rauschenberg 2010, pp. 205–8). Richards highlights Rauschenberg's sustained interest in themes of religion and spirituality in his early works (Richards 2011, pp. 39–49). Smith explores its visual dialogue with historical artists such as Botticelli (Smith 2016c, pp. 77–103). Krčma examines Rauschenberg's formal analysis and media experimentation in the *Inferno* series (Krčma 2017, pp. 964–75). These studies have undoubtedly provided valuable insights into the *Inferno* series—its formal innovations, socio-political connections, identity politics, and art historical context. While this scholarship offers diverse perspectives, it has rarely addressed the *Inferno* series from a religious or spiritual standpoint, nor examined in depth how Rauschenberg reconstructs and extends Dante's religious visual narrative in a highly secularized context.

Drawing on detailed image analyses and historical contextualizations of previous research, this article examines how Rauschenberg conveys the spiritual dimension of Dante's text through visual language, material experimentation, and modes of spectatorship—thus addressing a key gap in the literature on religion, spirituality, and modern art.

2. Definition of Concept

2.1. Spirituality

In this article, spirituality is understood not merely as a general search for meaning, but as an orientation toward transcendence, a disposition that turns away from the physical or secular toward sources of meaning that exceed these domains. Unlike religion, which denotes a system of communal beliefs and practices generally grounded in faith in a deity (Astrow et al. 2001, pp. 283–87; Hall et al. 2004, pp. 386–401), spirituality here refers to a decentralized and individualized experience of transcendence in a secular age (Taylor 2007, pp. 25–28). It is not simply the confrontation with "ultimate concerns" such as sin, death, alienation, or existential Isolation, but rather the way artistic engagement with these concerns may open toward a transcendent dimension—whether conceived in philosophical, aesthetic, religious, or psychological terms (a disposition toward God, toward beauty, or toward the infinite possibilities of the self). This study takes Dante's *Inferno* and Rauschenberg's reinterpretation as a paradigmatic case to illustrate how spiritual meaning is mediated across historical and material boundaries.

2.2. Solvent Transfer

Solvent transfer refers specifically to the image-transfer technique pioneered by Rauschenberg in 1952 (Krčma 2017, pp. 964–75), which is distinct from the use of solvents in conservation or restoration. The process involved cutting images from magazines such as *Life* or *Sports Illustrated*, soaking them in turpentine or lighter fluid, and rubbing the back of the page to reverse-transfer the image onto new paper. The solvent dissolved the ink, detaching the image from its original context while softening its contours, introducing blur, and fragmenting details. Rauschenberg often layered these transferred forms with pencil, chalk, crayon, gouache, or watercolor, creating visually ambiguous, reversed impressions. In the *Inferno* series, this method served as a creative strategy to challenge the editorial authority of mass media and to reframe images within a secular yet spiritually charged visual language.

3. Reconfiguring the Sacred: From Theological Allegory to Modern Spirituality

This chapter employs iconographic analysis to examine how Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series engages with the textual imagery of Dante's *Inferno* and its later visual traditions. By comparing themes, symbols, and narrative structures, it demonstrates how Rauschenberg reconstructs the visual narrative of "hell" within modern media and contexts.

3.1. The Secularization of the Sacred Image

In the *Inferno* series, Rauschenberg does more than simply reinterpret Dante's allegorical-theological imagery. Instead, he translates it into a visual vernacular grounded in the material and psychological realities of Cold War-era America. This visual language is composed of media imagery, consumerist culture fragments, and bodily politics. It no longer adheres to the medieval cosmological-theological order, but instead reflects a modern social structure shaped by systems of violence, control, and desire (Wainwright 1993, pp. 89–94). In *Inferno* Canto 3, the narrative focuses on the warning inscribed on Hell's gate, the punishment of the uncommitted, and the opening scene leading to the River Acheron. Its central themes include the abandonment of hope, acceptance of God's just judgment, and the inevitability of souls entering Hell. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 3* (Figure 1), the ferryman Charon is replaced by a stark, oppressive industrial cargo ship (Sullivan 1950, pp. 11–17), while the dome of the U.S. Capitol—a potent symbol of state power—appears in the same frame. This juxtaposition transforms "Hell" from a site of divine punishment into a historical illusion shaped by the machinery of the modern state. Similarly, in the original *Inferno* Canto 12, Dante and Virgil reach the entrance to the first ring of the seventh circle of Hell—the realm of the violent—where they encounter centaur guards, symbolizing primal, savage, and uncontrollable violence. The scene unfolds in a steep infernal gorge, charged with a rushing, furious atmosphere and dominated by the menacing presence of these fearsome sentinels. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 12* (Figure 2), the centaur—a monstrous figure in Dante's original text symbolizing savage violence—is substituted by a Formula One race car in Rauschenberg's rendition. This vehicle embodies mechanized aggression, sensory thrill, and the cult of speed. In this context, violence is no longer an expression of personal savagery but has become a demonstration of technological systems. The infernal canyon of classical mythology is reimagined as a televised visual spectacle, shifting the locus of horror from the mythical to the media-saturated contemporary world.

Canto 31 of Dante's *Inferno* depicts Dante and Virgil's journey into the deepest region of Hell—the Valley of the Giants—where colossal figures stand as sentinels, half-submerged in a vast chasm. These giants symbolize pride and rebellion against divine authority. The canto features three principal giants: Nimrod, Ephialtes, and Antaeus. The canto's atmosphere is solemn and foreboding, underscoring the harshness of Hell's depths and the formidable presence of these mythic guardians. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 31* (Figure 3), the giants—Nimrod, Ephialtes, and Antaeus—no longer howl across the frozen plain. Instead, they appear as bodybuilders and weightlifters—cropped, recombined, and recontextualized. Their musculature bears the traces of mechanical reproduction—cut, collaged, and assembled into bodies under systemic control. One of the giants' hands even takes the form of a computer cursor, indicating not submission to divine will, but compliance with technological command. The figure of Adam—the falsifier—also undergoes a secular transformation. Instead of Dante's grotesque, swollen, and parched depiction, he appears as a sumo wrestler—monumental, performative, and non-Western. More significantly, his body is layered with credit cards, photocopiers, and corporate logos. The moral economy of sin gives way to the debt structures and simulated identities of capitalism. Throughout the series, the female body reappears as

flattened, magazine-style photographs. These images allude to both the punishment of adulterers in Dante's *Inferno* and the gendered disciplining of desire in contemporary visual culture. The cargo ship, Formula One race car, and bodybuilder deconstruct traditional sacred symbols while simultaneously reconstructing "ultimate concerns" oriented toward modern existential predicaments—such as systemic violence, technological fetishism, and the commodification of the body—as shown in Table 1. Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series should be understood not as a deconstruction but as a reenactment—not a repudiation of the sacred, but a mourning of its collapse. He compels viewers to confront an unsettling truth, after the sacred disintegrates, what emerges is not liberation but a new inferno—woven from images, systems, and debt—equally cruel, and perhaps more insidious.

Figure 1. Canto 3: The Vestibule of Hell, The Opportunists.

Figure 2. Canto 12: The Violent Against Neighbors.

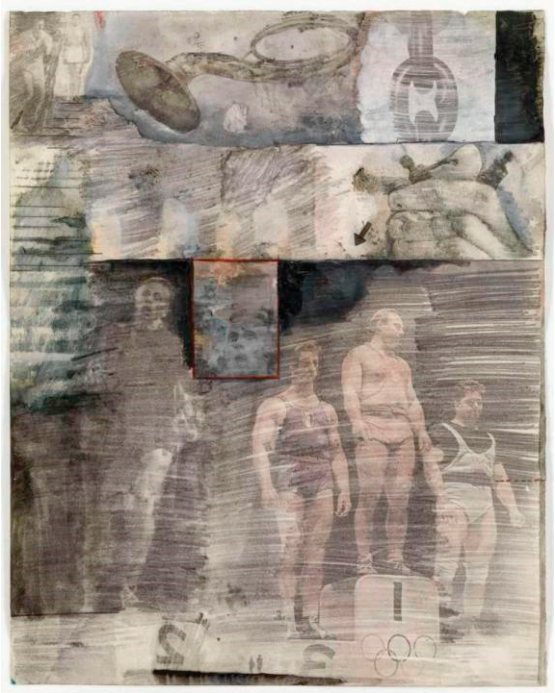

Figure 3. Canto 31: The Central Pit of Malebolge, The Giants.

Table 1. Contemporary Iconography in Rauschenberg's Dante's *Inferno* Drawings: Spiritual/Religious Translations and Critical Directions.

Dante's Original Element	Contemporary Image Used by Rauschenberg	Spiritual/Religious Translation	Modern Spiritual/Social Critique
Charon (Ferryman, Myth)	Modern cargo ship → Portrait of George Washington (Canto 3)	Symbol of death/transition; burden of power and history	Critique of national myth; metaphor for historical repetition
Centaur (Guardian, Myth)	Formula One race car (Canto 12)	Force of violence, speed, and loss of control	Technological alienation; dehumanized violence
Giants (Power, Myth)	Olympic weightlifter (Canto 31)	Primitive strength; oppressive authority	Critique of power worship; commodification of the body

3.2. Contemporary Expressions of Individual Spiritual Quest

In the *Inferno*, Dante's journey is primarily about recognizing and confronting the nature and consequences of sin. Rauschenberg, rather than diverging from this vision, recontextualizes it through the visual lexicon of Cold War America, incorporating mass media imagery, consumerist symbols, and representations of political violence. In doing so, he articulates a modern condition of spiritual dislocation and existential loss, exposing the alienation produced by secular modernity. In Canto 4 (Figure 4), Rauschenberg juxtaposes the Arch of Constantine—a symbol of Christianity's legalization—with a male figure from a golf club advertisement (True Temper ads). The result is a striking revelation: the gateway to faith has been occupied by consumerism. As Morgan David observes, the material supports of religious art—icons, ritual objects, sacred images—are here reduced to mere ink particles on the pages of *Sports Illustrated* (Morgan 2005, pp. 220–25). Through this solvent transfer, Rauschenberg reinforces T. J. Clark's argument: "The sharpest critiques of modernism are often sugar-coated in the language of commercial imagery." In *Inferno* Canto 17, it depicts usurers punished beneath a rain of fire on burning sand. Through a perilous descent on the back of Geryon, Dante and Virgil are carried into the Eighth Circle

of Hell. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 17* (Figure 5), an advertising golfer figure is used to represent Dante. This represents a "symbolic emptying" of the protagonist, replacing the unique soul-pilgrim with a standardized body shaped by advertising. The individual's spiritual quest is thus reconfigured as the dissolution and disorientation of subjectivity in consumer society, providing a sharp critique of modern spiritual rootlessness. As Tomkins recalls, the advertising golfer figure was selected because at that scale, it was the most neutral popular image I could find (Tomkins 1980, p. 158). When the standardized bodily grids used in advertisements serve as Dante's visual substitute, the unique spiritual pilgrimage of the medieval soul is reduced to a passive, disoriented condition within modern technological systems. The self becomes a mass-produced identity, lacking a spiritual anchor. The advertising golfer figure's standardized posture before a gridded wall epitomizes the disciplining of the body under industrial logic. So-called neutrality, in this case, functions as the forced erasure of difference. As the golfer figure recurs throughout the series (notably in Canto 17 and Canto 33), Rauschenberg highlights the absurdity of spiritual aspiration in a society dominated by commercial signs. Under the regime of advertising, human depth is flattened into two-dimensional surfaces of consumer imagery (Wainwright 1993, pp. 89–94). Meanwhile, Virgil appears in Canto 17 not as a solemn guide, but as a playful youth climbing a statue during Olympic festivities. The marble stadium of the 1960 Rome Olympics, once a symbol of classical ideals, becomes a site of frivolity—suggesting that Enlightenment rationality has degenerated into a parody of public spectacle. *Inferno* Canto 23 depicts Dante and Virgil's journey through the Fifth Circle of Hell, during which they narrowly escape pursuit by demons. Virgil's act of lifting Dante resembles a father cradling his child, conveying Dante's dependence on Virgil's guidance and protection, and symbolizing vulnerability and reliance in the spiritual journey. The original excerpt is provided below (Alighieri and Ciardi 1954, p. 188):

> "my Guide and Master bore me on his breast,
> as if l were not a companion, but a son."

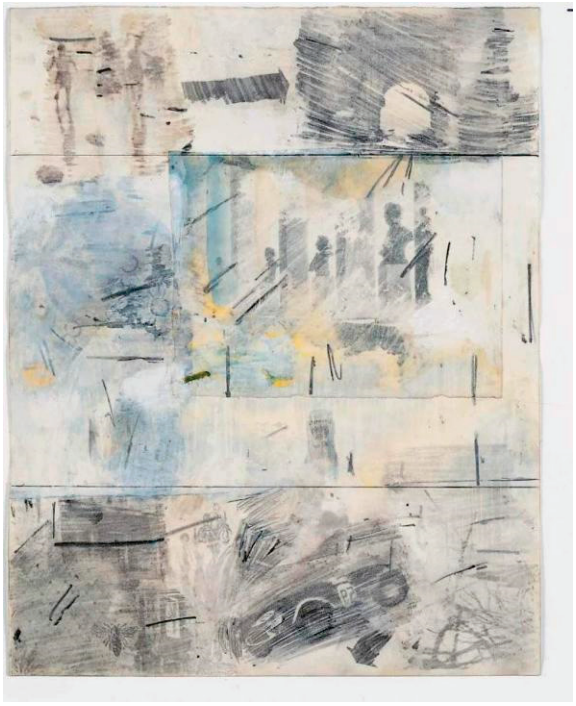

Figure 4. Canto 4: Limbo, Circle One, The Virtuous Pagans.

Figure 5. Canto 17: The Violent Against Art, The Usurers, Geryon.

In Rauschenberg's *Inferno* Canto 23 (Figure 6), the image of Virgil lifting Dante resembles not a companion's gesture but that of a father cradling a child. Rauschenberg draws on an advertisement featuring a father and son to underscore the pilgrim's helplessness. The warm familial image is recontextualized as a burdensome scene in hell, indicating that modern technological society has deprived individuals of a space for spiritual maturation.

Figure 6. Canto 23: The Hypocrites.

Dante's *Inferno* Canto 33 primarily focuses on the crimes and punishments of traitors. Ugolino recounts his harrowing imprisonment and starvation in the lowest, coldest circle of Hell. He offers a detailed account of his betrayal and confinement in the so-called

"Tower of Hunger," where he watched his sons gradually perish from starvation, powerless to save them. The canto vividly conveys his profound despair and grief, along with the tragic helplessness of familial love in such dire circumstances. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 33* (Figure 7), the image of a starving child lying supine on a cross shatters the illusion of well-being promised by consumer capitalism. When the healthy body promised by capitalist affluence is refigured as a Christ-like symbol of hunger and sacrifice, the advertising golfer reveals the hollowness behind the mask of neutrality. Through these haunting images, Rauschenberg lays bare the spiritual cost of modernity: the dissolution of selfhood, the commodification of the sacred, and the emergence of a new inferno hidden within the spectacle of abundance.

Figure 7. Canto 33: Circle Nine, Cocytus, Compound Fraud: Round 2, Antenora, Treacherous to Country; Round 3, Ptolomea, Treacherous to Guests and Hosts.

3.3. Diagnosing the Social as a "Contemporary Inferno"

In several illustrations, Rauschenberg replaces Dante's historical and mythological figures with contemporary individuals, thereby constructing a "modern inferno" (Smith 2016b, pp. 145–68). The images he selected were far from arbitrary; instead, they were carefully chosen "exemplary images" drawn from the visual archive of twentieth-century American mass media and public culture. These images themselves are widely recognized symbols, rooted in cultural myths—such as the nation's founding ideals, consumerism, and technological worship—as well as collective memory. Through Rauschenberg's appropriation and recombination, they form a symbolic system diagnosing the conditions of modern society (Antonella 2011, pp. 323–37). This reconstruction of "hell" is essentially a profound spiritual diagnosis of society as a site of pathology, exposing core aspects of the modern existential crisis. Rauschenberg astutely incorporated emblematic 1960s media events—such as the Olympics and presidential elections—and their key figures into the visual narrative of the *Inferno* series. In his later paintings, the allusions to contemporary events became more explicit. Rauschenberg suggests that Dante and Virgil encounter escalating violence and chaos as they descend into the lower circles of Hell (Dickerman 2017, pp. 24–25). In Canto 12, The Violent Against Neighbors, Dante and Virgil visit the seventh circle of Hell, where they encounter "great war-makers, cruel

tyrants, and highwaymen—those who shed the blood of their fellow men" (Smith 2016a, pp. 258–67). Rauschenberg reimagines this scene through Cold War figures, depicting Dante as John F. Kennedy and Virgil as Democratic elder statesman Adlai Stevenson, and placing them alongside Nixon, who is portrayed as both a perpetrator and a victim (Smith 2016b, pp. 145–68). In this depiction, Nixon appears as a "docile body" trapped in a cycle of violence. His distorted presence in the river of blood underscores the vulnerability of political authority and the material embodiment of punishment (Matthews 1966, p. 68), while also highlighting the arbitrariness and ideological fluidity of the labels "good" and "evil" during the Cold War.

In *Inferno* Canto 3, as the pilgrim and guide approach the gates of hell, Rauschenberg uses an image of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs to depict this ominous structure. In *Canto 9* (Figure 8), Virgil and the pilgrim attempt to enter the infernal city of Dis, moving through an environment cloaked in the shadows of heretics. Rauschenberg uses a magazine photograph showing the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., where the dome is stripped of paint for restoration, revealing a reddish sheen reminiscent of the Soviet Union. The monument is tilted and distorted, symbolizing the perceived communist threat to American democracy. A Japanese communist protester is depicted as one of the three Furies (Erinyes), while the city of Dis is formed by an inverted U.S. Capitol building. The Statue of Liberty is removed, and the entire structure is coated with red anti-rust paint, evoking a Cold War atmosphere of menace. This can also be interpreted as a satire on the extreme anti-communist paranoia of the 1950s. In *Canto 21* (Figure 9), Rauschenberg depicts Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba as Malacoda, the demon captain. In the following canto, this role is assumed by a figure resembling Fidel Castro. This fluidity of identity underscores Rauschenberg's critique of the arbitrary moralization of "evil" and the ideological fluidity of Cold War politics. Finally, in the lowest circle of hell, Rauschenberg selects a fashion model from an *Esquire* advertisement—dressed in Russian-style clothing with a skull motif embedded in her torso—to represent a soul possessed by demons. This fusion of the fashionable body and the sinner's skeleton serves as a biting satire on the visual politics of late capitalism: damnation no longer stems from theological transgression, but from the convergence of media aesthetics and political will (Seckler 1966, pp. 73–84).

Figure 8. Canto 9: Circle Six, The Heretics.

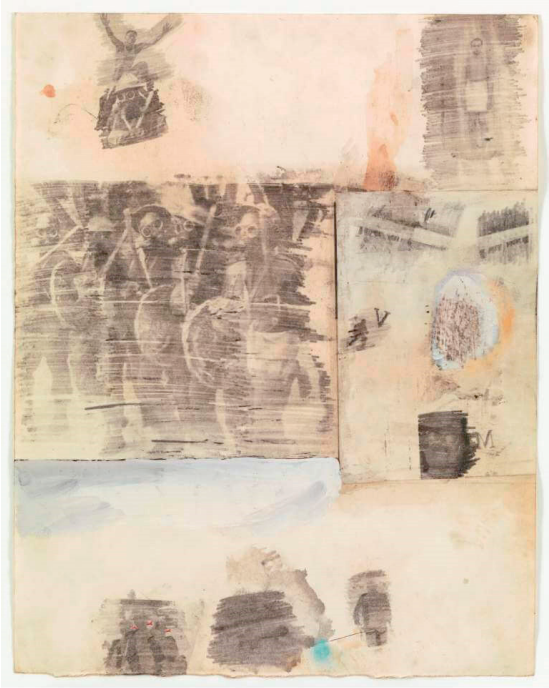

Figure 9. Canto 21: Circle Eight, Bolgia 5, The Grafters.

Rauschenberg's "modern inferno" is not a random collage of images but a coherent diagnostic framework centered on three types of alienation. First, corporeal alienation: the fragmented bodies of bodybuilders in *Canto 31* and the standardized grid of the advertising golfer in *Canto 17* (Figure 5) reveal how consumer society disciplines the body. This reflects the ways modern visual culture enforces normative forms and behaviors, turning individual bodies into standardized, reproducible images within commercial and media systems. Second, through solvent transfer, images of figures such as Lumumba and Castro are detached from their original historical contexts and suspended as signifiers adrift in an indeterminate semantic space. This referential dislocation parallels the fate of sinners in both Dante's *Inferno* and Rauschenberg's reimagined hell, where they are trapped in perpetual systemic cycles with no possibility to transcendence. Third, Dante's theological structure of guidance—led by Virgil (reason) and Beatrice (grace)—is replaced by the nihilistic revelry of Olympic youth (*Canto 17*) and the mechanical determinism symbolized by directional arrows. When these arrows close into a loop (as in *Canto 18*, where souls chase their own footprints), the youth is absorbed in repetitive athletic performance. Rauschenberg reconstructs Dante's hell as a powerful site of "spiritual diagnosis" by juxtaposing Cold War political imagery, consumer culture symbols, and alienated bodies. He reveals that the social system itself—its logic of violence, symbolic control, bodily discipline, and existential emptiness—already constitutes a cruel and hidden "contemporary hell." This powerfully exemplifies art's potential as a critical medium within a secular context to examine the collective spiritual condition and "ultimate concerns."

4. Media as a Spiritual Interface: Solvent Transfer and the Metaphysics of Materiality

4.1. Solvent Transfer and the Materiality of Secular Transcendence

Rauschenberg was a bold innovator in the field of visual media. In his *Inferno* series, he adopted solvent transfer to move away from traditional techniques such as painting or drawing, exploiting the medium's tendency to blur, fragment, and reverse imagery in order to sever its ties to mass-media contexts. The resulting images are not full reproductions

but unstable residues—traces that suggest what is absent. This absence is not void but a "presence-in-withdrawal," oscillating between visibility and disappearance, staging what might be called a material manifestation of spiritual elusiveness.

Such ambiguity and contingency form the material basis of a secular spirituality: an attentiveness generated not by metaphysical salvation but through rupture, dislocation, and suspension in visual and historical conventions. Here, Derrida's notion of the "trace" does not secure presence but points toward it through delay and deferral, evoking a fragile sense of the sacred (Montag 2011, pp. 26–44). "Transcendence" in this context refers less to metaphysical salvation than to a rupture in visual and historical conventions. Solvent transfer breaks images open—blurring, reversing, and disrupting them—detaching them from their editorial frameworks. This distortion compels viewers into interpretive uncertainty, echoing the disorientation of Dante's infernal journey. What is transcended, then, is not the world itself but the authority of traditional image-making, the coherence of realism, and even the unity of the pictorial surface. Rauschenberg's medium destabilizes the image's integrity, inviting a liminal space where trauma, memory, and doubt coexist—a material spirituality grounded in the fragmented conditions of modern existence.

Critics have frequently likened this effect to the low-resolution, flickering surfaces of mid-twentieth-century American television screens (Gilbert 2017). As Joseph and Rauschenberg insightfully observed, this media effect reveals a new visual logic shaped by television and print culture—where images are no longer eternal and clear but unstable, blurred, and fragmented: a new visual ontology (Joseph and Rauschenberg 2003, p. 177). In this sense, Rauschenberg's medium is no longer a passive vessel for imagery but a dynamic interface—a permeable surface through which the image penetrates, dissolves, fragments, and recomposes itself.

The fragility of these images—with their blurred edges and ghostly contours—is not simply an aesthetic choice, but deeply echoes the themes of shadow and suffering in *Inferno*. Since 1954, Rauschenberg had incorporated fragmented materials and imagery in his *Combine Paintings*, arranging them according to an open-ended associative logic. In contrast, the *Inferno* series provided a more ordered compositional framework through Dante's tightly structured poetry, which, in Rauschenberg's words, allowed him "to test whether I could work in a more constrained and structured way" (Keach 2023, pp. 140–74). This structure led him to develop a visual language that interweaves fragmentation and figurative narration, generating a tension between chaos and form, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Technical–Visual–Spiritual Correspondence of Solvent Transfer in the *Inferno* Series.

Solvent Transfer Technical Feature	Visual Effect	Type of Spiritual Experience (Secular Transcendence)
Reversal (mirror transfer)	Image flipped left–right, spatial orientation disrupted	Breaks visual habits, induces perceptual instability and cognitive disorientation
Blurring	Softened contours, loss of detail	Creates uncertainty, forcing the viewer to actively participate in meaning-making
Erasure (partial removal)	Portions of the image disappear or are incomplete	Suggests ruptures in history and memory, prompting reflection on loss and forgetting
Layering with other media	Images from different times and contexts coexist	Generates a sense of temporal dislocation, mirroring the spiritual–historical interweaving in The *Inferno*
Muted tones	Soft, desaturated colors	Conveys a sense of decay and the fragility of existence
Visible material traces (paper texture, stains)	Visible paper fibers, stains, scratches	Reinforces the materiality of the work, reminding viewers of the medium's fragility and the erosion of time

Rauschenberg often divided the picture plane into two or three horizontal bands, sometimes marked by hand-drawn lines extending across the composition. He also inserted rectangular frames into the composition, generating additional "spatial zones" where visual fragments from different temporal layers—past, present, and mythic—interweave. This compositional strategy is especially evident in the illustrations for Cantos 2 to 4 (*The Descent, Vestibule of Hell, and Virtuous Pagans*). In these works, the images frequently blur distinctions between foreground and background, literal and symbolic, universal and particular, turning the picture surface into a theatrical stage where Dante's poetic narrative engages with the cultural anxieties of Cold War-era America.

For instance, in Dante's *Inferno* Canto 18, the narrative describes the first and second bolgias of Malebolge in the eighth circle of Hell, where mainly "fraudsters" and "pimps" are punished. Here, Sinners are scourged by demons, stripped naked, and immersed in filth, reflecting the moral corruption and degradation of their crimes.In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 18* (Figure 10), Dante and Virgil appear in the image's upper-left corner as small, marginal figures. This arrangement highlights the punished bodies as the central visual focus. The punishment of panderers and flatterers—endless marching and immersion in excrement—is visualized through a choreography diagram, annotated with penciled arrows. These arrows resemble schematic diagrams from industrial manuals, suggesting that punishment in hell has been systematized, depersonalized, and even choreographed. The lower portion of the image includes close-up visuals of human waste, which blur and obscure the faces of the damned. The dark palette and hazy visuals suggest that the paper's surface itself contributes to the degradation of these bodies.

(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 10. (**a**) Canto 18: Circle Eight, Malebolge, The Evil Ditches, The Fraudulent and Malicious: Bolgia 1, The Panderers and Seducers; Bolgia 2, The Flatterers. (**b**) (Smith 2016c).

The "spirituality" conveyed through the materiality of Rauschenberg's medium is not the conventional form rooted in transcendental faith or doctrine. Instead, it denotes a modern, secular experience of uncertainty, fragmentation, and emotional intensity, emerging from the viewer's encounter with degraded images, ambiguous signs, and disrupted visual coherence. The solvent transfer serves not as a conduit for divine revelation, but as a means of evoking existential reflection, temporal dislocation, and the

search for meaning amid visual and historical instability. For instance, in Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 31*, Nimrod's figure is created through a selective transfer of a weightlifter's photograph. Only the torso's center remains intact, while the rest dissolves into blurred, liquefied stains, making Nimrod resemble a failed photographic negative emerging from solvent traces. His "partial visibility" not only signifies the punishment for hubris but also symbolizes the limits of human perception when facing the monstrous. Precisely for this reason, the ambiguity of solvent transfer became Rauschenberg's most powerful tool for conveying The *Inferno*'s core themes: invisible fear, unknowable realms, and unspeakable suffering. For viewers at the Castelli Gallery, these layered images—worn by mechanical reproduction and distorted by technical processes (Krauss 1981, pp. 47–66)—were not simply seen but experienced as a modern ritual of descent. This immersive experience, echoing Dante's narrative arc, turned aesthetic contemplation into a mediated spiritual journey—a living response to Virgil's iconic warning: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

4.2. Fragmented Narration and Continuous Temporality

When creating illustrations for his *Inferno* series, Rauschenberg adopted a "one canto at a time" approach: he began working immediately after reading the English translation of each canto, without reading ahead. This method aimed to elicit an immediate response to each canto's context, enabling him to re-experience Dante's evolving narrative across centuries (Antonella 2011, pp. 323–37).

Rauschenberg treated time as a compositional element, juxtaposition Dante's sacred narrative with contemporary Cold War imagery. The imagery in each canto corresponds to contemporary events at the time of its creation, producing a visual expression of simultaneity. The size of each image was carefully calibrated to reflect the narrative weight of the corresponding text. As Rauschenberg explained to Krauss: "The space given to each image corresponds to the space occupied by the author's words" (Krauss 1999, pp. 86–116). For instance, in *Inferno* Canto 31, when Dante and Virgil encounter giants—massive figures described in detail and mistaken for mountain-like forms—Rauschenberg selected an image of Olympic wrestlers that spans the width of the page. This image covers more than half the page, making it one of the largest transferred images in the series. This precise alignment with the text suggests that the *Inferno* illustrations are not merely visual "representations," but rather a synchronous construction of textual structure, temporal density, and visual rhythm. To emphasize the text–image juxtaposition, Rauschenberg added brief narrative summaries—typed by Michael Sonnabend—to each work.

Rauschenberg often overlaid solvent transfer images with arrows and technical drawing lines to create a visual guidance system. This system functions both as a path indicator and as a theological response to industrialized visuality. For example, some images depict scenes of gilded arms being transported behind car windows, reflecting a contradictory fusion of the religious and the mechanical. Although certain elements clearly reference Dante's narrative, the precise correspondence between image and text is often ambiguous and unstable (Feinstein 1990, p. 346). Dore Ashton once attempted to "read" these images linearly from top left to bottom right but soon realized that such a linear sequence is likely absent (Dore 1963, p. 37). This is a key characteristic of the solvent transfer medium: the inherent chaotic ambiguity of the images transforms viewing into a state of deep meditation. In this mode of viewing, the audience gazes with focused intensity, much like confronting an icon—facing a juxtaposition of the full moon and industrial crane wreckage, entering a profound state where perception and cognition intertwine.

Dante's *Inferno* itself possesses a loosely integrated structure—each canto can be appreciated as a relatively independent fragment, yet woven into a unified design by divine

arrangement (Alighieri et al. 1982, pp. 21–23). Rauschenberg extends this tension visually, acting like an "image-based montage practitioner" who reconstructs Dante's underworld journey through the visual syntax of fragmentation of his *Combine Paintings*. Within a single image, multiple temporal-spatial scenes, iconic symbols, and allegorical actions are juxtaposed—for example, in *Canto 31*, the giant's torso, Antaeus's hand, chains, and horns appear side by side—expressing a nonlinear spiritual narrative.

Just as Dante often introduces the next canto with a refrain, Rauschenberg sometimes links two images through shifting visual motifs. Cantos 31 and 32 exemplify this—giant feet and legs reappear at the top of the Canto 32 illustration. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 7* illustration, Dante and Virgil are shown only as legs and lower body contours at the top edge of the image, implying passage through a heterotopic space. In Dante's *Inferno* Canto 34, Dante and his guide leave the deepest part of Hell—the Circle of Judas—where they behold Lucifer himself. The devil's vast wings beat relentlessly, producing icy gales that freeze the waters of Lake Cocytus—a potent symbol of absolute cold and despair. Thereafter, Dante and his guide climb up and down Lucifer's body, emerge from Hell, and enter a natural cavern, preparing to return to the light of the living world. This moment combines elements of terror, desolation, and deliverance, marking the end of the journey through hell. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno Canto 34* (Figure 11), movement unfolds along a continuous vertical path from top to bottom, echoing Dante's description of the inverted descent through Lucifer's body. The heterogeneity and scale differences within these images resonate with Dante's portrayal of hell's fragmented nature, as well as his own confusion and moral disorientation when confronting hell. Rauschenberg once expressed to Clement Greenberg his desire to "recreate Dante's sensory overload in understanding human sin and suffering." The visual spectacles crafted by Cold War media provided a contemporary context for this goal—within these "media inferno," morality and truth themselves became obscured and ambiguous.

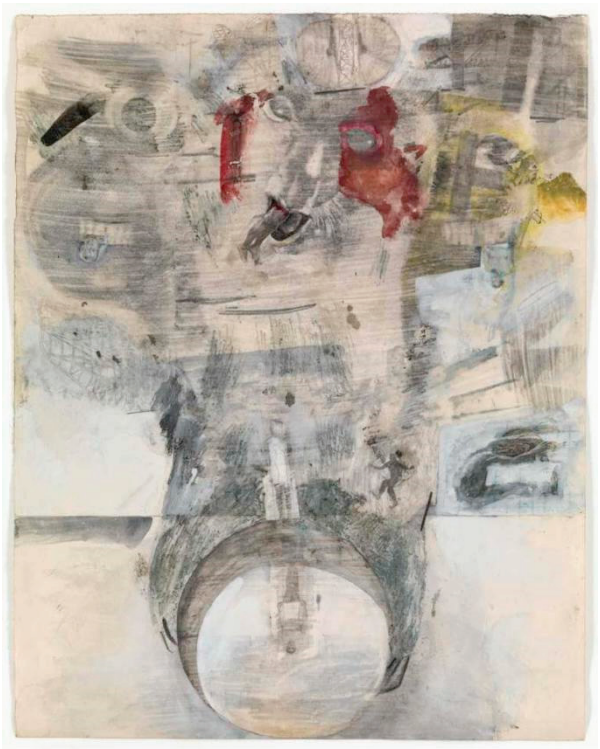

Figure 11. Canto 34: Circle Nine, Cocytus, Compound Fraud: Round 4, Judecca, Treacherous to their Masters.

4.3. The Spirituality of Material

The solvent transfer technique employed by Rauschenberg exemplifies "material spirituality," a concept that highlights the capacity of material forms and artistic processes to generate spiritual experience within secular contexts. Instead of seeking to restore a lost sacred aura, his practice reactivates materiality—through blurring, erasure, and fragmentation—as a site where spirituality emerges in contingent, elusive traces. Rauschenberg made extensive use of images from contemporary magazines such as *Life* and *Sports Illustrated* (Siedell 1999, p. 75; Cullinan 2008, pp. 460–70). In Walter Benjamin's terms, these mass-produced industrial images—highly reproducible and widely accessible—had long lost their traditional "aura" (W. Benjamin 2018, pp. 226–43). Unlike religious images shaped by ritualized viewing and the passage of time, magazine photographs intrinsically lack uniqueness or sacred value. Rather than attempting to restore this lost aura, Rauschenberg's solvent transfers re-materialize the images through the very process of manual rubbing, which introduces contingency—blurring, erasure, and fragmentation. This procedure produces singular, unrepeatable traces that simultaneously embody artistic control and its loss.

It is precisely within this tension that Rauschenberg reopens the possibility of spiritual presence. Yet this presence is not the direct revelation of the divine, but what might be called a negative presence—a spectral remainder perceptible only through absence. The solvent transfer's blurred edges and fragmentary marks do not disclose transcendence positively but intimate it through withdrawal, what Derrida describes as a "trace". In this sense, the transfer mediates "between visibility and spiritual presence" not by manifesting sacred content but by embodying the paradox of a presence marked by disappearance. Branden Joseph insightfully compares these traces to stigmata: like wounds that mark divine intervention through corporeal rupture, Rauschenberg's solvent traces mark the convergence of history, material process, and artistic intent (Joseph and Rauschenberg 2003, p. 177). They function neither as purely symbolic images nor as mere material residues, but as indexical inscriptions where spirituality arises through its very elusiveness.

Embedded within Dante's textual framework, these transferred images transform fragments of consumer culture into symbols of spiritual elusiveness. For example, in *Canto 31*, a photograph of Olympic wrestlers is transfigured into a blurred giant, echoing Dante's figure of bondage yet refusing stable representation. Here, meaning is not given but demanded: confronted with fragmented, unstable imagery, viewers must pause, reflect, and assemble significance from partial signs (Palmer 2007, pp. 1–8). This act of projection transforms looking itself into a contemplative practice. Unlike Dante's *Inferno*, which directs the pilgrim toward purification and redemption, Rauschenberg's *Inferno* opens onto a spiritual space defined by instability, alienation (Matthews 1966, p. 68), and the impossibility of transcendence.

In this way, the *Inferno* illustrations become tools for secular visual contemplation. Their blurred and fissured surfaces disrupt the functional logic of mass media and reawaken perceptual attentiveness. This contingent, trace-based quality does not rest on originality or sacred authority, but emerges through the viewer's active, interpretive labor. Rather than guiding toward redemption, Rauschenberg's transfer images stage a modern ritual of descent without God, in which viewers confront despair, absence, and fragmentation, and through this confrontation cultivate a fragile yet persistent form of spiritual attentiveness. Whereas Dante's *Inferno* ultimately serves the pilgrim's purification within a teleological framework of salvation, Rauschenberg's *Inferno* offers no such eschatological horizon. Instead, it transforms the descent into a secular ritual of perception, where viewers are confronted with fragmentation, absence, and instability. The "spirituality" at stake here

is not transcendence beyond the secular, but a fragile attentiveness to meaning within the very conditions of modern alienation.

4.4. A Ritual Without God: The Rituality of Viewing in Rauschenberg's Work

Rauschenberg's Inferno series uses an unconventional interpretive mode to deconstruct the sacredness and authority of traditional religious imagery, while at the same time constructing a spiritual ritual rooted in modernity. In the post-religious era, spiritual experience shifts away from the church and toward acts of viewing, the fluidity of images, and inner processes of perception (Belting 2005, pp. 302–19). Accordingly, the series can be seen as a form of "secular pilgrimage." It transforms the exhibition into a ritual space, elevates viewing into a performative act, and turns fragmented images into vehicles of modern spiritual meditation (Morgan 1998, p. 50). This ritual of viewing, grounded in material traces and perceptual participation, differs sharply from Andy Warhol's commodified repetition of religious motifs, which suggest the consumption of faith, and from Bill Viola's immersive video installations, which pursue the contemporary sublime. Rauschenberg's path is one of "descent": it embraces ambiguity, fragmentation, and the noise of everyday life—excrement, advertisements, and images of catastrophe. Within the rough corporeality of carnivalesque aesthetics (Lachmann 1988, pp. 115–52) and the material "failures" of the medium (blurring, dissolution), spirituality arises through direct confrontation with the conditions of existence and through a profound mode of perceptual engagement.

This ritual is concretely activated in the exhibition process, producing a unique "viewing ritual". In contrast to many medieval church contexts, where meaning was mediated through liturgy or clerical authority, viewers of Rauschenberg's works enter an open, fluid, and ambiguous interpretive space (Mitchell 2005, pp. 336–41). His images are no longer fixed symbolic systems but fragmented elements cut, transferred, and reassembled. This fragmentation destabilizes the boundaries of sacred narrative and forces viewers to rely on their own perception for interpretation. Thus, viewing no longer centers on receiving meaning but shifts toward actively generating it. Viewers move through the gallery, pause, contemplate, and develop personal rhythms of experience, becoming poets of their own pilgrimage (Bourriaud 2002, p. 125). Ultimately, this ritual is less about attaining redemption than about sustaining an open cycle of resistance, reflection, and provisional meaning.

More significantly, the locus of spirituality shifts from external ritual and institutional authority to inward personal experience. In traditional religious imagery, sacredness typically derives from divine manifestation, saintly guidance, or doctrinal authority. By contrast, in Rauschenberg's visual world, spirituality emerges as a state of "contemplative engagement" between viewer and image—a contemplative, ineffable relation grounded in interiority. This inward turn resonates with modern existentialism and phenomenology that affirm the value of individual perception (Eliade 1959, p. 81). Rauschenberg's *Inferno* illustrations are thus not merely responses to religious visual traditions; they also attempt to construct a contemporary ritual form. The traditional moral journey is reimagined as a spiritual passage enacted through acts of seeing, interpreting, and perceiving. In this journey, each viewer becomes a traveler, a thinker, and the author of their own Inferno. This ritualistic quality depends heavily on specific visual conditions created by the medium—fragmentation, blurring, and trace-based ambiguity. It is precisely the visual uncertainty and openness of meaning produced by the medium (solvent transfer) that compel viewers to abandon passive reception and enter an active, contemplative mode of seeing. This mode itself constitutes the core practice of the secular spiritual ritual that Rauschenberg designed. He holds a unique position in the postwar lineage

of religious art: he neither returns to traditional notions of the sublime (as Viola does) nor indulges in postmodern irony (as some of Warhol's works do) (B.-C. Benjamin 2000, pp. 1–36). Instead, through a material critique of the medium and a ritualized reconstruction of the viewing process, he forges a path that confronts the burdens of existence through art and activates individualized spiritual resonance in an era of divine withdrawal. The outcome of this "ritual without God" is not purification in the Dantean sense but a secular practice of endurance—an act of facing fragmentation, ambiguity, and the absurd, through which viewers may discover either an individual resonance or a fleeting sense of shared human condition. Therefore, by deconstructing traditional image sacredness and narrative authority, Rauschenberg reconstructs the function of artistic space as a "secular sanctuary" and the act of viewing as a practice of a "Ritual Without God," offering a non-institutionalized spiritual pathway for individuals seeking meaning in a secularized world.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series as a reconfiguration of Dante's vision within the conditions of Cold War modernity. Through solvent transfers, Rauschenberg transformed fragments of mass media into unstable, contingent traces that mediate between material process and spiritual presence. These blurred and fragmented marks do not restore the sacred aura of religious imagery but reopen a space of attentiveness where viewers confront existential estrangement. In this sense, the Inferno illustrations enact what might be called a "ritual without God"—a secular practice of perception in which spirituality persists not as transcendence, but as fragile meaning-making grounded in material trace.

By recasting Dante's narrative of eternal punishment into a fragmented, secularized visual form, Rauschenberg redefines the role of art in the post-religious age: not to promise redemption, but to sustain the possibility of spiritual engagement. The *Inferno* series thus stands as a key case study at the intersection of art and spirituality, significant for showing how media materiality can generate new forms of secular ritual and spiritual attentiveness. This contribution deepens debates on the persistence and transformation of religiosity in secularization theory and provides critical resources for rethinking the relation between religion, art, and spirituality in contemporary culture.

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Article

Memory and Therapy: A Study of the Function of the Hexi Baojuan in Local Society

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Abstract: The Precious Scrolls of Hexi (*Hexi Baojuan*) embody the "collective memory" of the people in the Hexi region. The "Creation memory" and "Traumatic memory" are two key types of collective memory. Through the continuous recording and (re)creation of memories, the Baojuan exerts a therapeutic effect on people's inner confusion and physical or mental pain. By studying the representative works of the ritual and secular Baojuan of the Hexi Baojuan, the Longhua Baojing (龙华宝经), and the Precious Scroll of Kalpa Survival (*Jiujie Baojuan*救劫宝卷), this paper examines the creation memory and traumatic memory of the Hexi people, thereby revealing the hidden tension between memory and healing.

Keywords: Hexi Baojuan; collective memory; therapeutic function

To uncover the "historical truth" of the Hexi region since the Ming and Qing dynasties, there is not only the path of historical books and local chronicles. The Hexi Baojuan (河西宝卷) has also implicitly or explicitly preserved the "collective memory" and "historical mentality" of the people (Zhang and Zhao 2022, pp. 138–47). The "collective memory" present in Baojuan consists of two main dimensions, namely, the "memory of creation" and the "memory of trauma", both of which are closely related to the therapeutic function. On the one hand, the Creation memory provides the people with the expectation of "restoring paradise", which is a kind of consolation and hope for the sufferings and illnesses that the people have encountered in their present life; on the other hand, the key to the healing of the Traumatic memory lies in the constant expression and discussion of suffering, thereby releasing the people's inner pain, repression, and distress. Specifically, this paper focuses on two Hexi Baojuan. *Longhua Baojing* is a rendering of the people's "Creation memory", offering the Hexi people with an imaginative source for the afterlife; *Jiujie Baojuan* is repeated recitation and representation of the suffering of life, essentially a catharsis and comfort to the people's inner wounds caused by the Great Gulang Earthquake (古浪大地震). Through these two different psychological mechanisms, the people have integrated "collective memory" and "Baojuan therapy" into the contents of Baojuan. This paper adopts a combined approach of textual close reading and fieldwork to conduct the research which explores how the "creation memory" and "traumatic memory" in the Hexi Baojuan, respectively, construct the collective cognition of the people in the Hexi region, and achieve physical and mental healing through specific mechanisms.

1. Literature Review

As representative works of the Hexi Baojuan, the *Longhua Baojing* and the *Precious Scroll of Kalpa Survival*, carry the "collective memory" of the people in the Hexi region and hold significant research value. A review of existing scholarship shows that relatively few

studies have been conducted on the *Longhua Baojing* and the *Precious Scroll of Kalpa Survival* and that current research is rather limited in scope, focusing primarily on their historical significance and religious thought. For example, Li Haozai's *The Structure and Characteristics of Chinese Folk Religious Thought—A New Exploration of the "Longhua Baojing"* examines the religious thought of the *Longhua Baojing* from the perspective of folk religion or popular theology (H. Li 2012, pp. 22–29), while Zhao Guangjun's *The Historical Significance of the "Precious Scroll of Kalpa Survival"* analyzes its historical meaning in light of the text's content and background (G. Zhao 1991, pp. 50–52). Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, research on Baojuan has gradually moved beyond the binary framework of literature and religious studies, turning instead to interdisciplinary approaches such as anthropology and sociology. For example, Su Yunruo's *Buddhist Nun, Spirit Medium, Chant Leader: Precious Scrolls (Baojuan) Performance and Female Religious Participation* centers on the Precious Scrolls performances from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the modern era, focusing on the diverse practices of female religious participation. From anthropological and sociological perspectives, the study integrates rich historical documents and fieldwork data, presenting distinct interdisciplinary characteristics (Su 2018, pp. 322–97). Building on this trend, the present study shifts the focus to the healing function of the Hexi Baojuan and explores the social functions of Baojuan.

In the field of therapeutic functions of baojuan, several scholars have conducted relevant research. For example, Qiu Huiying's *Zhen Sui Yu Zhi Bing—Wu Di Xuanjuan De Yiliao Zuoyong* (鎮祟與治病——吳地宣卷的醫療作用) explores the folk tradition in the Wu region of China where people tend to trust witchcraft over medical treatment. When falling ill, locals often seek healing through kanxiang (incense reading) or xuanjuan (scripture telling), which effectively soothes the body, mind, and spirit of patients, representing a form of "cultural healing" (Qiu 2017, pp. 287–324). Li Yongping's *"Changhe" Yu "Xianghe": Baojuan "Hefo" Zhong De Rangzai Chuantong Fawei* ("唱和"与"相和":宝卷"和佛"中的禳灾传统发微) focuses on "hefo", arguing that it is essentially a continuation of the ancient Chinese tradition of "xianghe". Its core social function lies in achieving healing and disaster aversion through the field of sound poetics and the effects of collective participation (Y. Li 2022, pp. 40–51). Additionally, Rostislav Berezkin focuses on "scripture telling and precious scroll recitation" in the Changshu region of Jiangsu, conducting research from multiple perspectives. Regarding the dynamic nature of Baojuan texts, he emphasizes that contemporary "adapted texts" represent a natural continuation rather than a break from tradition, as seen in Yu Dingjun's optimization of old texts (Berezkin 2015a, pp. 101–40). By comparing Baojuan performances in neighboring regions such as Zhangjiagang, Kunshan, and Suzhou, he highlights the uniqueness of Changshu in terms of textual innovation and ritual organization (Berezkin 2019, pp. 115–75). In his work *On the Performance and Ritual Aspects of the Xiangshan Baojuan: A Case Study of Religious Assemblies in the Changshu Area*, he analyzes the performance forms and ritual details of the *Xiangshan Baojuan* within the context of "scripture telling" in Changshu (Berezkin 2015b, pp. 307–44). Most of the aforementioned studies focus on the Baojuan in southern China and fail to explore how Baojuan achieves its healing function from the perspective of collective memory. This paper addresses these gaps by investigating the creation memory and trauma memory in the Hexi Baojuan, as well as how they realize the therapeutic function.

2. What Is "Collective Memory"?

The social psychological concept of "collective memory" was proposed in 1925 by the scholar Maurice Halbwachs.[1] By definition, "collective memory" comprises the "memory of events" shared, inherited, and constructed by the people in a group or social activities. An important aspect of the therapeutic mechanism of Baojuan is the "eventization" of the

disease—treating the disease by dealing with "events". On the one hand, the memory of events in Baojuan may be historically true, but it needs to be "eventized" through linguistic and textual re-examination to make it easier to process; on the other hand, Baojuan reciters or copiers may also project their inner worries into the language and text, effecting the "materialization" of the spirit of nothingness, and solving their psychological problems by dealing with fictional events or ritualized "texts", i.e., "created" memories, thus achieving spiritual healing. It thus becomes clear the process of eventization, ritualization, and textualization of collective memories are also the process whereby the therapeutic function takes effect, and there is a close correlation and great tension between the two.[2]

Further, what is memory? And how can memory be "eventized"? Memory is a social and cultural construct. To study history, it is necessary to look for past events within the frame of collective memory. Changes in the frame (also known as the mnemonic diagram) can lead to changes in memory. That is, changes in the memory frame over time can lead to forgetting or distortion of memories, and members of a society will change their memories in an undetectable way. At the same time, individuals place themselves in the collective to leave a memory, and the collective memory also achieves self-realization at the level of individual memory (Halbwachs 1992, pp. 44–49). Similarly, historical consciousness can be narrated like a literary work. Hayden White argued that historical consciousness has a deep structure and is poetic. History intervenes in events with metaphorical language, woven plots, writing purposes, and ideologies, which all are strongly poetic. This is similar to literary creation. History is essentially narrative and not entirely objective (White 1975, pp. 30–31). Historical narratives are subjective, and the selection of the form, content, and perspective of historical narratives, is even more subjective. How people construct and describe the past depends on current thoughts, interests, and expectations, and the construction of memory is under the control of power (Halbwachs 1992, pp. 44–49). Collective memory reconstructs itself based on interests and perceptions.

In a sense, official history books and historical documents are a form of officially recognized "collective memory", while folklore is a kind of "collective memory" that has not been officially certified and remains in the oral traditions of the people, passed down from generation to generation. Constructing memories into events in oral traditions or texts is the "eventization" of memory, which encompasses two main meanings: one is to construct collective memory to form oral traditions or texts; the second is the construction of events in collective memory to form narrative in oral traditions or texts. The former is the process of producing the form of works, and the latter is the process of producing its content. The engraving and copying of Baojuan, as well as related assistance in engraving and copying, reflect the textualization and formalization of the people's collective memory; the historical events reflected and the story constructed with Baojuan are the "transformation" of events in collective memory. If history books represent the official narrative and recognition of collective memory, then Baojuan represent the folk "voice" of collective memory.[3]

Only collective memory can make a nation be cohesive. For this reason, all nations have always attached great importance to the preservation of shared folklore and collective memory. National identity and its enduring stability are subject to collective memory and its forms of organization. In other words, the demise of a nation is not the disappearance of a tangible substance, but forgetting on the collective and cultural level (Assmann 2011, p. 140). Therefore, every nation must lay stress on the inheritance of collective memory, which is conducive to strengthening national identity and cultural self-confidence. As is well known, collective memory is largely based on the nation's early sacred books and literary classics (J. Huang 2017, pp. 38–45), including, of course, folklore classics. In view of this, the scope of documents for ethnic and historical research should be expanded to include literary works, folk customs, and even rituals, rather than being limited to offi-

cial historical documents such as history books and local chronicles. Similarly, historical narration should not be limited to classical texts and their writing styles.[4]

According to Jan Assmann, there are two ways to maintain collective memory: ritual association and textual association, among which textual association is how people shape collective memory by interpreting classical texts (J. Huang 2017, pp. 38–45). Meaning is current only when people disseminate the text; once the text stops, it ceases to be a carrier of meaning, but a tomb (Assmann 2011, p. 74). Literary texts are passed down through generations, and through the interpretations of different readers at different times, they acquire different meanings; and the unfixed nature of meaning is also essentially a kind of cultural shaping force, which depends on the possession of ideological power, and the transfer of collective memory. At the same time, "memory distortion" often occurs in this transfer process. In other words, the meanings of stories accumulated over generations are constantly multiplying and disappearing through the continuous selection, adaptation, and dissemination by the people. In essence, this is a kind of "cultural transfer"—amid change and constancy, the power of ideology and folk collective memory interact and evolve together. Therefore, in a sense, Baojuan has been a kind of "ritual association" and "text association" of folk collective memory since the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the contents of society, folklore, religion, literature, and other aspects reflected in them are the collective memory of the people. Through recalling them, the reciting and copying of Baojuan provide "sacred healing" by eventizing and textualizing collective memories. In what follows, the author will focus on the textual analysis of Baojuan from the perspectives of Creation memory and Traumatic memory—the two major forms of "collective memory".

3. Creation Memory and Healing in the Hexi Baojuan

Creation memory is based on myth. The internal logic linking memory and myth is usually as follows: an event arising in the minds of people, whether real or fantastical; the people first shape events in their memory, and then shape the myth from the event; whereafter the myth is re-deposited in their memory and serves as an explanation and guide for similar scenarios in the future. Although myths do not reveal much about the background of collective memory, they provide the researcher with a more in-depth understanding of the "recalling people". Because people are constantly reinventing events, shaping myths, and adding color or detail, the researcher can see a "reflection" of the people and their attitudes to life in the myths. Or, as Sartre put it, myth is an act of transcendence (May 1991, p. 44).

Creation myths are collective imaginations about the creation of heaven and earth and the origin of mankind. In ancient times, human beings were unable to fully understand the true nature of such issues as the origin of the universe, special natural phenomena (e.g., thunder and lightning), and the emergence of human beings, so they created myths in the form of fantasies to explain them. Existing Creation myths around the world reflect primitive human beings' imaginative understanding of the creation of the world and the birth of all things in nature, as well as the collective memories of the ancestors of all nations. In the West, there are mainly ancient Hebrew Creation myths and ancient Greek Creation myths, whose classical texts include *the Bible·Genesis* and *the Theogony*; in China, the widely circulated Creation myths are "Pangu (盘古) opened up the sky and the earth", "Nüwa (女娲) mended the sky", and "Nüwa created man out of clay". In the folk Baojuan, especially the ritual Baojuan, there are a considerable number of Creation myths; this kind of mythology, on the one hand, reflects the deity system and its mythological system of various folk sects, and on the other hand, it also reflects the "Creation memory" of the general public.

There exist many Baojuan describing the creation of the world and the birth scene of humans, which together form a relatively systematic folk sects' "Creation theory" and

establish a space-time order system of the God-ruled world. Meanwhile, disorder means chaos, and chaos means "disease". How to restore order and re-establish the space-time order system is the key to treatment. The theme of "restoring Paradise" (乐园复归) in Baojuan symbolizes the healing process, i.e., returning to sacred space through divine salvation or divine healing, which is the basic path of healing in the Creation myths of Baojuan. Due to the proliferation of folk sects during the Ming and Qing dynasties, there are an immense number of various sectarian Baojuan. In the following, the author mainly chooses *Gufo Tianzhen Kaozheng Longhua Baojing* (古佛天真考证龙华宝经, hereinafter referred to as *Longhua Baojing* 龙华宝经) and *Jiujie Baojuan* (救劫宝卷) of the Hexi Baojuan for separate research, and employs them as representatives to analyze the "Creation memory" of the Hexi people, hoping to explore and obtain the path to healing people's inner anxieties.

The *Longhua Baojing* that the author read is a letterpress thread-bound edition, with four volumes in a case. The case cover is marked with *Gufo Tianzhen Kaozheng Longhua Baojing*, and the covers of the four volumes are all titled *Longhua Baojuan*.[5] This edition has no page margins, columns, or borders, but includes top and bottom margins. The name of the book *Longhua Baojing* is written above the single fishtail (鱼尾)—which is tiny (thin) with a black opening—and the page number is written under the single black fishtail. The four volumes consist of 116 sheets, and there are 11 lines on each page and 22 characters on each line. The book is written in rhyme and prose, with clear and well-preserved print, and no punctuation throughout. According to the Canadian sinologist Daniel Overmyer, the book of *Gufo Tianzhen Kaozheng Longhua Baojing* was written in the 11th year of the Shunzhi (顺治) reign of the Qing Dynasty (1654) (Overmyer 1999, p. 248), or in the 9th year of the Shunzhi reign of the Qing Dynasty (1652), by Gong Chang (弓长). Regarding Gong Chang, in Chapter Sixth of the Mahayana Yuan Dun (大乘圆顿教) sutras *Gufo Wusheng Yuhua Jieguo Zunjing* (古佛无生玉华结果尊经) discovered by Chen Junfeng in Zhangxian County漳县, Dingxi City 定西市, Gansu Province 甘肃省, there is a record saying that "the founder is Founder Gongchang, whose Taoist monastic name is Wushuang, commonly known as Hailiang" (Chen 1999, pp. 122–26).

Gufo Tianzhen Kaozheng Longhua Baojing is an early Baojuan with the best-organized text (Overmyer 1999, p. 249), and a relatively complete Creation and Kalpa myths. Its Creation episodes are described as follows:

> "In the beginning, the world is a blurred entity. There was nothing in it, and then out of nothing came beings, as well as a light.
>
> In the halo of light, the Buddha's body was formed. The body became integrated with the light, thus becoming Buddha. As the golden body began to take shape, the heaven and the earth were established.
>
> Wusheng Mother 无生母 gave birth to Yin 阴 and Yang 阳. She created a Former Heaven 先天 and conceived holy babies of countless incarnations.
>
> She gave birth to a boy and a girl, named Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女娲.
>
> Li Fuxi 李伏羲 and Zhang Nüwa 张女娲 are both the ancestors of human beings. Through Jin Gong 金公 and Huang Po 黄婆, they were married.
>
> On the Wuji (戊己土) day, two eggs, Yin and Yang, were taken out, rolling down from Mount Meru 须弥山. Suddenly there was a loud bang.
>
> In miraculous golden light, they mated. This is how human relations and marriages started.
>
> After the world was created, another 9.6 billion humans were born, with countless Buddhas among them.

> Wusheng Father 无生父 and Wusheng Mother instructed that since the Eastern Land 东土 was uninhabited and desolate,
>
> 96 descendants were sent to the Eastern Land. They all had halos on their heads, wore five-colored clothes, and rode on two wheels.
>
> Ancient Buddhas 古佛 were born to rule the world, and the true world appeared when the earth was first separated from heaven.
>
> Wusheng Laomu 无生老母 gave birth to two children, Fuxi and Nüwa, marking the advent of human relations." (Zhang and Ren 2019, p. 238)

In *Longhua Baojing*, when all things in heaven and earth did not exist, there was only a blurred entity, from which came Budda. Subsequently, Wusheng Laomu gave birth to Fuxi and Nüwa, marking the advent of human relations. Then they gave birth to 9.6 billion sons and daughters whom were sent to the Eastern Land. However, these 9.6 billion descendants were addicted to the worldly pleasures of the Eastern Land and unwilling to return and stayed there until today. To save them, Wusheng Laomu set up calamities in three periods of Qingyang 青阳, Hongyang 红阳, and Baiyang 白阳, respectively, and convened the Longhua Three Meetings 龙华三会, in which Lamp-Burning Buddha 燃灯佛, Sakyamuni Buddha 释迦佛, and Maitreya Buddha 弥勒佛 took charge of the world, respectively, to bring those descendants back to the Pure Land 极乐世界. To fulfill the wish of Wusheng Laomu, Maitreya Buddha came to earth from heaven and began to enlighten the world as the founding master Wang Sen 王森.

Gong Chang declared himself to be the fourth incarnation of the sect master after Wang Sen, Tianzhen Laozu 天真老祖, and Cuihua Zhangjie 翠花张姐, and stated he founded the Mahayana Tianzhen Yuan Dun Sect just because he was trying to fulfill the mission of "the universal salvation in the final kalpa (末劫总收圆)". Gong Chang also claimed that the "the universal salvation in the final kalpa" is a sacred and honorable task with a long road ahead, and therefore many gods and Buddhas will come spontaneously to assist and participate in the Longhua Three Meetings. Based on the founding master Wang Sen's inner elixir practice technique, Gong Chang also created a new practice technique called "Ten Steps Practice" (十步修行) and passed it on to his believers in the name of Wusheng Laomu. According to the Baojing, as long as the believers conscientiously practice according to the practice methods, they can return to the Pure Land constructed by Wusheng Laomu.[6] It can be seen that the "Creation Story" (创世说) in *Longhua Baojing* is to promote the doctrine of Gong Chang's Mahayana Yuan Dun Sect. However, it also implies the collective imagination and folk interpretation of the believers of the sect on the newly created world. The "human birth story" is the central tenet of religious creationism. To rationalize the origin of human beings, all the world's major religions have constructed a "Creation memory" that suits their needs. Judging from *Longhua Baojing* alone, the creator had exhausted their efforts to establish the supreme deity status of Wusheng Laomu and promote the deity system of the sect. In the beginning, ancient Buddhas, as the hermaphroditic supreme deities, were fatherly in general, although they also had the function of procreation in theory. To highlight the function of the sect's maternal deity, the creator created the image of the "Wusheng Laomu", a supreme deity. Deities such as Wusheng, Lao Tianzhen 老天真, Wusheng Father, and Wusheng Mother, who were born out of "ancient Buddhas", actually strengthened the divine status of Wusheng Laomu through the gendering of deities and the division of work based on gendering and functions (Liang 2004, pp. 44–47). In a sense, the ultimate establishment of the supreme divinity of Wusheng Laomu was an objective need of the religious creation view centered on human birth—mother goddesses tend to give the populace a deep sense of belonging and trust.

The world was chaotic with no order, so there was no disease, nor cure. The key is that Wusheng Laomu established the order of the world, marking the beginning of human relations. When there is order, there is the possibility of rebellion, namely, later 9.6 billion descendants being lost in the worldly pleasures of the Eastern Land and unwilling to return. The cause of the problem was that rebellion occurred due to unfulfilled desires, which led to disorder, and disorder means chaos. To restore the original order, Wusheng Laomu sent Maitreya Buddha down to the world to save the world, and Gong Chang created a new practice technique, the "Ten Steps Practice". The order-restoring process is a metaphor for the healing process of the disease. Firstly, sanctify the healing process, with deities involved at every step to distance them from the people of the mortal world, and inspire a sense of awe through preaching the words of deities, so that people can recognize their ailments. Secondly, sanctify the means of healing. Since the foundation of the practice is derived from deities, this will give believers full confidence in the healing process. Thirdly, sanctify the healing space by creating the Mahayana Tianzhen Yuan Dun Sect to bring the believers into a sacred realm with a clear state of mind. Finally, sanctify the healing result. For the universal salvation in the final kalpa, the purpose of the treatment is to return to the Western Pure Land—the restoration of order means the fulfillment of merit. In this healing process, the "Ten Steps Practice" is equivalent to the Taoist inner elixir practice in the effects, but it is simpler and easier to practice, meeting the practice needs of ordinary people. Thus, the "Loss-Practice-Return" model of healing with the Baojuan text was once again fulfilled.

Here, Baojuan combines "healing" with the theme of "salvation in the end times (末世救劫)" and discusses the anxiety that the "dooms of the last days (末世劫数)" has caused in the hearts of believers, as well as the measures that have been taken to eliminate this fear. The concept of "salvation" is a pervasive theme in folk Baojuan. On the one hand, it is used to promote the teachings, attract followers, and deify the leaders of the sects; on the other hand, "doom" is also an externalization of the inner anxiety of the believers, which is a metaphor for the inner pain and mental tension in the face of the last days, or the chaotic world. Through the gods' salvation and the collective efforts of the masses of believers, the "doom" is overcome, which signifies the successful completion of the treatment. The Baojuan therapy is sacred due to the involvement of deities, especially the creation of sacred space by reciting and copying Baojuan, which includes the diffusion of incense smoke, the hanging of portraits of the founding master, and the collective participation of believers in the rituals, etc. These practices facilitate inner healing and achieve the therapeutic effect of regaining psychological equilibrium (S. Zhao 2021, pp. 134–40).

In addition, the "*Jiujie Baojuan*", created in Wuwei 武威, Gansu Province, during the period of the Republic of China, has a Creation plot that is obviously influenced by Confucian and Taoist Creation theories, closer to traditional Chinese myths. The Baojuan text mainly discusses the three Creation myths, Pangu's separating the sky and the earth, the Three Sovereigns of ancient times 上古三皇, and Nüwa's mending of the heavens, without any system of deities of folk sects. It begins:

"Emerging from chaos
His Majesty Pangu
Opened heaven and developed earth;
The Three Sovereigns,
Heaven, Earth, and Man
Each fulfilled their assigned duties.
What was rising and clear
Became the heavens

With sun and moon, stars and planets;
What was descending and muddy
Became the earth
With the five grains and good fields.
His Majesty Fuxi
The Divine Husbandsman.
And so on to the Yellow Emperor-
Later there was
Her Majesty Nüwa
Who restored heaven and put it right." (Idema 2015, p. 335)

From the above two Baojuan, it is evident that in the Creation imagination of the Hexi people, the world was mostly in a state of chaos when it was not yet in existence. Whether it is the Creation myth of the Wusheng Laomu in the ritual Baojuan or the Confucian- and Taoist-influenced Creation myth of Pangu separating heaven and earth, and Nüwa creating man out of clay in the secular Baojuan, they are unanimous on this point. Generally speaking, the "view of Creation" of the Baojuan was first and foremost influenced by Taoism.[7] Lao zi 老子 says: "There is something that came into being before heaven and earth. It is silent, vast and invisible; it stands alone and never fails; it runs in cycles and never stops, therefore, it can be the Mother of all things in heaven and earth."[8] This is basically the same as the order of creation in *Longhua Baojing*: in the beginning, there was a state of chaos, and then all things in heaven and earth came into being. Secondly, there are two general approaches to "creating the world" in the Baojuan. The first one is the creation by creator deities, such as the Ancient Buddha, Wusheng Laomu, Pangu, Nüwa, etc. The second one is through the natural evolution of Heaven and Earth, such as Wuji (infinity) 无极, Taichi 太极, and Yin-Yang 阴阳, representing the ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism on the Creation plot, respectively. It can be seen that the Baojuan was deeply influenced by the thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and then the folk spirit was added by later generations. Finally, the Creation mode in *Longhua Baojing* with Wusheng Laomu as the supreme god transforms the world generation theory in the philosophical sense into the Creation theory in the sense of faith, and the relationships between man and nature into the relationships between man and God, mother and child. This shift meets two needs: first, the evolving religious–secular power structure and god-making movement; second, the localization of foreign (especially Buddhist) ideas into the Chinese folk belief system.

The author noted that, on the one hand, the Creation myths in the Baojuan promote the folk sect's view of Creation, the creator of the Baojuan constructed a collective memory of "this sect conforming to the will of heaven" by reconstructing the Creation myths, such as Gong Chang's claim that the "Mahayana Tianzhen Yuan Dun Sect" he founded was to achieve the purpose of "the universal salvation in the final kalpa". In reality, this construction was intended to legitimize the sect and build a collective imagination that the sect could help people out of their misery. Consequently, the people, out of their belief in the gods, turned exclusively to this sect, and the collective memory also underwent migration and distortion in the process. On the other hand, the Creation myths in the Baojuan also reflect, to some extent, the collective memories and imaginaries, at least those recognized by the sect, thus serving the moral purpose and secular function of enhancing cohesion, indoctrinating believers, and uniting the sect.

These two interact with each other to realize the healing effect of the Baojuan. Its general trajectory can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the Baojuan presents the Creation

myth and the consciousness of salvation, and creates idolatry to attract and persuade the believers, so that they have faith or superstition and believe in the power and omnipotence of idols. Secondly, it proposes the idea of practice and depicts the scenes of the last days, which makes the believers who are frustrated in reality turn to deep infatuation and enter the space of reciting Baojuan to achieve a state of balance and clarity. Thirdly, sacred space is created through texts, smells, music, portraits, and even ritual dances to soothe the uneasy feelings of the believers, while regaining their health through their constant self-suggestion. This provides ample evidence that there is a strong correlation between myths and rituals. The description in the Baojuan of "going through the world's disasters towards Great Harmony" is actually a metaphor for the process of treating illnesses, namely, the process of "encountering disasters (illnesses) → rescuing disasters (illnesses) → solving disasters (illnesses)". This process, on the one hand, requires the ordering and sanctification of the Baojuan-reciting and -singing space and rituals; on the other hand, it also needs the wholehearted faith and participation of the believers, and the effect is closely related to the strength of their beliefs, which is clearly observable in the field investigation.[9]

4. Traumatic Memory and Healing in the Hexi Baojuan

The theory of Traumatic memory is associated with Jeffrey C. Alexander, an American sociologist and cultural theorist. According to him, cultural traumas occur when individuals and groups experience horrific events that leave indelible marks on the group consciousness, become permanent memories, and irrevocably alter their future. (Alexander 2004, p. 1) He emphasizes the social attributes of the construction of cultural trauma memory, and argues that trauma studies are characterized by social collective memory. Thus, starting from narratives of trauma or suffering, exploring the construction of cultural trauma memory at the level of literary narrative transcends the empirical reality of individual literary writing and has become one of the key concerns of contemporary cultural and literary studies (Duan 2015, pp. 20–24). The depiction of collective trauma in Baojuan fits the psychological needs of the grassroots and satisfies the collective imagination of the people's "traumatized community", so it can transcend individual traumatic experiences and express the collective "traumatic memory".

As an important genre of folk literature, Baojuan continuously records and represents the collective memory of the people, of which a vitally important part is the memory of trauma. For example, many of the Hexi Baojuan depict the disastrous events that happened in the history of the Hexi region, which often left the population with indelible nightmares of the mind. *Jiujie Baojuan* (救劫宝卷), created during the Republic of China period, centers on the story of the famine caused by the Wuwei earthquake in Gansu Province in 1927, the people of Dajing 大靖 (now Gulang) who fled to Zhongwei 中卫, Ningxia 宁夏 in 1928, and then returned to their hometowns after the year of famine in 1929. The Baojuan not only includes the narratives of fleeing groups and the hardships encountered on the way to escape the famine, but also describes the fleeing families as individuals. In one of these families, the husband, Zhang San 张三, succumbed to starvation in Zhongwei, and his wife, Zhang Chen Shi 张陈氏, had been struggling to survive in Zhongwei before finally returning home:

"In the seventeenth year
Of the Republic of China
Disasters and plagues ravaged widely.
Old Lord Heaven
Did not release any rain:
Indeed a most terrible drought.

The heat of the sun
Shriveled plants and shrubs,
No tree was to be found anymore.
People had no grain,
Horses had no hay,
It was really a pitiable situation.
Even if you had the money
You could not buy any
Of the five grains, rice, or noodles.
Hunger was so severe
That the common people
Fled in all directions, east or west.
People ate people,
Dogs ate dogs,
A scene rarely seen since antiquity.
In villages all around
People had fled in such numbers
That no sign was found of human habitation.
To that was added
The disaster of warfare
As violent bandits roamed about.
And as a result
People of one family
Fled, each in a different direction." (Idema 2015, p. 335)

People fled everywhere. "They headed to Liangzhou 凉州, Ganzhou 甘州, and then Suzhou 肃州; those who fled to the south went to Xining 西宁 to seek a way to live; those who fled to the east headed to Zhongwei and then Ningxia; those who fled to the north went to Shawo 沙窝, Mongolia 蒙古, and Tartary 鞑靼" (Zhang 2007, p. 185). Most of them fled to Zhongwei in Ningxia, but the Zhongwei people were not yet able to support themselves, let alone offer help. In the 19th year of the Republic of China, the Jade Emperor 玉帝 finally sent fierce gods to banish those people with "unpardonable crimes"[10] to the uttermost depths of hell. At the same time, the Jade Emperor issued a decree to comfort the people, and since then the weather had become favorable and the grain had been plentiful. Those who had fled from the famine finally made their way home when they heard about the timely rains and grain harvests in their hometown. In such a desperate "hunger epic" of the Hexi people, was the creator merely complaining about the world, or crying out in suffering? What were the real causes of this "catastrophe"? As we know, an expression means the "presentization" and "materialization" of existence, revealing a "mode of existence" for existence in its realistic predicament—existence is the essence of expression (S. Huang 2018, p. 96).

The human senses can only receive information with differences, and these differences must be encoded as events occurring in space and time (e.g., encoded as "changes") in order to be perceived. On the surface, it seems that *Jiujie Baojuan* is a piece of folk literature created by the people of Dajing, Gulang, which faithfully records the disasters suffered by the people of Dajing in natural and man-made calamities. Its important historical and

documentary value is undeniable. The historical value of *Jiujie Baojuan* can be better understood if the literary text and the historical text are studied in an "intertextual" manner.

According to the *Gulang County Records* 古浪县志: "In the 16th year (of the Republic of China) (1927), an earthquake destroyed all the houses in the city." In the *Two Surviving Buildings after the Earthquake* 地震劫余的两座建筑物, Zhao Yanyi 赵燕翼 also says: "In the 16th year of the Republic of China (1927), an earthquake of magnitude eight on the Richter scale occurred at 5 a.m. on 23 April, flattening Gulang County to the ground."[11] Another record states:

> "The second deadly earthquake in modern Chinese history in terms of human casualties was the Gulang Earthquake on 23 May 1927. The epicenter was just over a hundred kilometers west of the Haiyuan Earthquake 海原地震, and the two regions are located in the same tectonic structure. It is reasonable to say that since experience had already been gained in the investigation and relief of the 1920 Haiyuan Earthquake, and the Gulang Earthquake was a magnitude eight quake just a short distance away, scholars would have expected the Geological Survey Agency 地质调查所to formally take on the responsibility of investigating earthquakes, but in practice, it failed to do so. In line with the Northern Expedition 北伐, Fen Yuxiang's 冯玉祥 Northwest Army 西北军then occupied the Shaanxi 陕西, Gansu, Ningxia, and Henan 河南, so the Beiyang government 北洋政府 would not pay attention to the earthquake here. In addition, Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 and Wang Jingwei 汪精卫 staged coups on 12 April and 15 July 1927, respectively. Therefore, after the Gulang Earthquake occurred, even though there were media publicity and vigorous fund-raising efforts, it eventually became a lonely smoke in the border region under the White Terror 白色恐怖, with no public attention. The epicentral intensity was XI, resulting in the deaths of over 41,400 people and the loss of 275,000 heads of livestock." (Feng 2018, pp. 172–206)

Historical documents and historical literature on science and technology often contain only a few words about earthquakes, whereas literary fiction can elaborate on this and vividly present the historical facts. From the text of *Jiujie Baojuan*, the author can obtain a more detailed picture of the situation in the earthquake-stricken area for the study of disaster history, especially to have a more accurate understanding of the "historical mentality" of the people in dealing with such events. Obviously, the people did not simply recognize earthquakes as "natural disasters", but rather as "Jienan (劫难)" caused by people's moral decline. The term "Jie (劫)" is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word kalpa (Jiebo, 劫波 or 劫簸), which means "an immensely long period of time". It is a Buddhist term derived from Brahmanism in India, and through the spread of Buddhism, it has profoundly influenced the people. In common usage, "Jie" actually means "natural and man-made disasters". Although it is clothed in the garb of Buddhism, it is more closely aligned with the original meaning of Brahmanism.[12]

At the same time, the author also noticed that in the Baojuan, in the face of such a cruel situation, in addition to resenting the natural disaster, the vast majority of people attributed it to the coming of the "catastrophe". The opening chapter of the Baojuan describes the "Five Jie (five catastrophes)" suffered by the people of Wuwei—earthquakes, droughts, floods, plagues, and wars, which were the biggest "catastrophes" in the lives of the people in ancient China, resulting in a strong "sense of salvation" in it. The reason lies first in how the ruling class had taken advantage of the people's belief in the folk sects to manipulate their minds, making it difficult for them to think about the actual causes of their misery. Instead, they believed their misfortunes were retribution for failing to observe religious or moral teachings in their current or previous lives. In the eyes of the

people, the "chaos of raging wars" was due to "no reverence for the gods of heaven and earth, lack of filial piety to parents, disrespect for teachers and elders, waste of grains, and treachery in the hearts of the people" (Zhang 2007, p. 182), which were all heinous sins that heaven would punish. According to the common narrative pattern of the Baojuan, their sins are so grave that even the Jade Emperor 至高神 is shocked by them, and the Jade Emperor, while pitying the world, will help the people to get rid of their sufferings and get through the catastrophes by "dispatching the divinities of misfortune descended upon the earth and arrest all sinners." Natural disasters such as earthquakes and droughts are all caused by these vile criminals, but they are also "catastrophes" that people cannot escape. If the people expect to be protected from natural and man-made disasters and no longer displaced from their homes, they had to perform good deeds and refrain from evil. This is also the typical theory of "karma", which is strongly promoted by Buddhism and ancient Chinese folk sects, and is embedded in many works of folk literature, forming a fixed "narrative structure".

For the creator, the narrative structure of the Baojuan is superior to related concepts such as metaphors and paradigms, because narrative structures emphasize order and sequence, which are relatively well suited to changes, life cycles, or any developmental journey (White and Epston 1990, p. 3). Order and sequence mean stability and security for the people, and the real-life experience of reciting Baojuan can often save the crumbling psyche and then heal the "traumatic memories" of suffering—folk beliefs provide spiritual comfort for the people at this time (Li and Hao 2019, pp. 117–23). In this sense, the idea of "karma" is not meaningless. The theory of karma is an important idea in Buddhism. Whether they are "Five Jie (five catastrophes)" or "Ten Jie (ten catastrophes)", they are all the effects of the "evils" done in previous lives. That is to say, "no cause, no effect". Those who commit no wrongdoing will not suffer disaster. *Jiujie Baojuan* was originally written for the people of Wuwei to remind themselves and remember their history. The creator wanted the people to bear in mind the instruction of "do much good, no evil"; otherwise the miserable scene of humans would never end. Of course, through the Baojuan, the people also complained about the brutal rule of the ruling class and the suffering brought about by the warlords and gentry (G. Zhao 1991, pp. 50–52)[13], forming the traumatic memory of the times:

"Last year's crop failure
Was followed by warfare
And epidemics that spread everywhere,
But grain was requisitioned
While able men were drafted,
Causing the common people great hardship.
Now in the eighteenth year
The drought still continued,
So the young grain refused to sprout:
For hundreds of years
People had not experienced
Such a poor harvest, such a calamity!
One bushel of wheat—
Its price shot up
To no less than five silver foreign dollars;
One bushel of rice—

Was nowhere to be found
Even for eight dollars in solid cash.
Heaven released no rain
And even sow thistle plants
Had already all been dug up;
Not only elm tree bark
But also chaff
Had also completely been exhausted." (Idema 2015, p. 347)[14]

Overall, the "sense of salvation" and "traumatic memories" in *Jiujie Baojuan* are not only a reflection of the real historical events of the period of the Republic of China, but also a narrative of the suffering of the people, and a response to the theory of "karma", reflecting the creative mentality of the creator who was concerned about reality and keen on metaphysical discussions. For readers, the narration of the people's own sufferings makes them angry and sentimental, but the causal ideas that it reveals make them feel that it is foolish, which may be the "common problem" of almost all folk literature works. Yet, "what exists is reasonable". All the words that give meaning to things are the result of interpretation and the product of the search, and what determines this search is the "map" and "frame of vision" adopted by the people, or as Erving Goffman called it, "interpretive framework" (White and Epston 1990, p. 5), or as Wang Mingke 王明珂 called it, "historical mentality".

5. Conclusions

In sum, the author has mainly examined the Creation myths and suffering narratives depicted in the Hexi Baojuan from two perspectives: Creation memory and Traumatic memory in collective memory. The author finds that the Hexi people's collective memory of Creation is broadly consistent, whether it is presented in a ritual Baojuan or a secular Baojuan. The primary difference is that the ritual Baojuan focuses on constructing their own system of deities. Driven by the needs of the secular power of religions, the gods of their religious sects are often regarded as the main deities, while the secular Baojuan align more closely with the Confucianism and Taoism, and their Creation myths are more akin to the Confucian and Taoist systems of deities. Traumatic memory is one of the common themes of both the ritual and secular Baojuan, with its core being the portrayal of the survival challenges of the Hexi people under difficult circumstances. However, this issue is often overshadowed by metaphysical discussions that lead to the theory of "karma". Whether it is the memory of Creation or the memory of Trauma, the continuous writing and shaping of them as collective memory plays a subtle role in physical and mental healing for the people who are in the sacred space of reciting and copying sutras. This is the main reason why the Hexi Baojuan have survived and continue to be transmitted to this day.

In addition, the therapeutic function of the baojuan is closely connected to spiritual healing. Spiritual healing refers to the process of helping individuals achieve balance, harmony, and growth in the spiritual, emotional and mental aspects through specific methods and practices. It emphasizes the exploration of the inner world of people, awakening their inherent self-healing ability to promote physical and mental health as well as overall well-being. The unique healing effect of the baojuan enables people to release inner pain and instills hope, making it a unique way to achieve spiritual healing. People express the pain pent up in their hearts through the writing of creation memory and traumatic memory, thereby activating the therapeutic function of Baojuan; through this operational mechanism, the hidden interconnection between memory and healing is revealed.

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Notes

1 Halbwachs defined it as the process and the result of sharing the past among members of a particular social group. The condition that ensures the transmission of collective memory is the need for social interactions and group consciousness to extract the continuity of that memory to distinguish it from individual memory.

2 "Collective memory", of course, is not an uncontroversial concept. Nor has its connotation by any means long been clarified theoretically. As a trend of thought in humanities in the 21st century, cultural memory theory has actually gone through a century of evolution from its inception to its flourishing. In the 1920s, French social psychologist Maurice Halbwachs first introduced the concept of "collective memory" (das kollektive Gedachtnis) into the field of social psychology, but his research on "collective memory" was limited to its significance for a specific group and did not extend to the cultural context. Aby Warburg, a contemporary of Halbwachs, also turned his attention to the study of "memory" in the 1920s. As an art historian, Warburg observed the phenomenon of the repetition and return of art forms, which, he argued, rather than being a conscious imitation of ancient art by future generations of artists, has its origins in the memory-triggering energy that cultural symbols possess. Warburg thus put forward the idea of "collective image memory" and called it "social memory". After World War II, Halbwachs' and Warburg's discussions on collective memory were forgotten in a long time, and it was not until the 1980s that they received renewed attention. Among those who were instrumental in this regard was the French historian, Pierre Nora. In his monumental seven-volume work *Les lieux de memorie*, he reexamined the distinction between memory and history and introduced the concept of the "field of memory". Since the 1990s, the study of "cultural memory" within the framework of cultural and historical anthropology has flourished in Germany. The main representatives are Jan Assmann, Professor of Ancient Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg, and Aleida Assmann, Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Konstanz. Jan Assmann developed Halbwachs' viewpoint and proposed the key concept of "cultural memory", which is of great contemporary significance, to summarize the various cultural inheritance phenomena in human societies, and put forward a series of basic concepts, such as communicative memory and cultural memory, "cold culture" and "hot culture", etc. Aleida Assmann, on the other hand, put forward the concept of "cultural text" and made a distinction between storage memory and functional memory for "cultural memory". Cultural memory theory has been interdisciplinary and intercultural from the outset, but what is noticeable is its increasingly widespread use in literary studies. In this regard, a significant contribution has been made by Aleida Assmann, who has studied metaphors of memory, and Astrid Erll, a professor at the University of Frankfurt, Germany, who has proposed and developed the idea of literature serving as a medium of "cultural memory". More details can be seen in Erll, Astrid. 2008. *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

3 As the spiritual representation and collective memory of the nation's past, Baojuan construct our state of life and moral starting point. The key to forming social collective memory lies in the classicization of texts and rituals. The media of cultural memory include Baojuan preaching, text copying, printing, praying, rituals, etc. Baojuan are "ethnographies" that have these types of memories and construct "imagined communities". Li Yongping 李永平. 2016. *Rangzai Yu Jiyi: Baojuan De Shehui Gongneng Yanjiu* (Feng 4) 禳灾与记忆:宝卷的社会功能研究 (封四). Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe.

4 More discussion can be seen in Wang Mingke 王明珂. 2005. *Zuqun Lishi Zhi Wenben Yu Qingjing—Jianlun Lishi Xinxing, Wenlei Yu Fanshihua Qingjie* 族群历史之文本与情境——兼论历史心性,文类与范式化情节. Text and Context of the Community's History—A Co-discussion on Historical Mood Style of Writing and Patternizing Complex. *Shanxi Shifan Daxue Xuebao (Zhexue Shehui Kexue Ban)* 陕西师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) (6): 7–15.

5 This volume is collected by Zhang Tianyou 张天佑 in Lanzhou 兰州. Moreover, the collection of Baojuan in the Dai family in Zhangye 张掖, Hexi Region 河西地区 also contains this type of Baojuan, which was copied by Dai Dengke 代登科, the first Bao-

juan copier of the Dai family. Dai Dengke was a believer of the Huangji Branch of Mahayana Yuan Dun Sect 大乘圆顿教皇极会 (The Dai family now has a copy of Dai Dengke's membership record).

6 For the interpretation of the Mahayana Tianzhen Yuan Dun Sect' 大乘天真圆顿教 doctrine and the content of *Longhua Baojing*龙华宝经, please also refer to Pu Wenqi 濮文起. 2000. *Zhongguo Minjian Mimi Zongjiao Suyuan*中国民间秘密宗教溯源. Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe.

7 On the "Creation Myths" in the Baojuan, refer to Lu Yongfeng 陆永峰. 2013. *Lun Baojuan Zhong De Chuangshishuo*论宝卷中的创世说. On the Creation Theory in the Precious Scroll. *Minzu Wenxue Yanjiu*民族文学研究 (3): 13–22.

8 From Laozi's *Tao Te Ching*道德经 (Chapter 25). In *Dan Hairuo Guwen Zhengjie*澹海若古文正解, it says Wu (Nothingness) was formed before Heaven and Earth, and You (Wholeness) was born from Wu. Wholeness refers to all things. It is silent and vast and invisible; it stands alone and never fails; it runs in cycles and never stops. Nothingness and wholeness shift repeatedly, and they are the Mother of Heaven and Earth and the origin of all things, which is called Tao 道.

9 From 20 to 28 July 2017, the team conducted a 9-day fieldwork in Zhangye 张掖, Jiuquan 酒泉, and Wuwei 武威, visiting local Baojuan inheritors Qiao Yu'an 乔玉安 and Dai Xingwei 代兴位, as well as participating in folk Baojuan reciting and singing rituals. From 15 to 20 January 2019, the team went to Jinta 金塔 of Jiuquan, Shandan 山丹, and Linze 临泽of Zhangye for investigation. At that time, the author was conducting a field survey of funeral rituals in Gangu 甘谷, Gansu Province, and therefore had no chance to participate in the collection and sorting of related materials, so the work was mainly completed by team members Ren Jiquan and Zhang Tianyou, to whom I would like to express my thanks.

10 Lascivious women, with disrespect for Heaven and Earth; people who kill farm cattle, animals, and humans; disobedient men who show no respect to parents; people who waste grains and do not cherish foods; people who use different Dou 斗 to cheat others; men who commit adultery and take away others' wives or daughters; people who ruin paper with no respect for knowledge; Officials who abuse public power; people who stir up enmity; parents-in-law detest daughters-in-law self-righteously for their sons. These ten categories of people are called people with unpardonable crimes in the Baojuan.

11 Quoted from *Gulang Dajing Tianzai Renhuo De Jishi*古浪大靖天灾人祸的纪实, Fang Buhe方步和. *Hexi Baojuan Zhenben Jiaozhu Yanjiu* 河西宝卷真本校注研究, Lanzhou: Lanzhou Daxue Chubanshe, 1992, p. 357. The exact date of the Gulang Earthquake in Gansu was 23 May 1927; here, the author Zhao Yanyi's 赵燕翼 record is incorrect.

12 "Jie (劫)" is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word "Kalap" or "Kalpa", meaning "time period" or "long duration". Originally, it refered to "an extremely long period of time". As a unit for measuring time in ancient India, it is sometimes freely translated in Buddhist scriptures as "a distinct time period" or "a great era". Before Buddhism, the Brahmanism had already used this term to describe an extremely remote time and to explain the periodic formation and destruction of the world. Buddhism adopted the term "Kalpa" to denote a long time and further used it to illustrate the movement process of the world's formation and destruction. However, Buddhism's interpretation of "Kalpa" differs from that of Brahmanism. Buddhism takes the concept of "Kalpa" as the basis for explaining time to elaborate on the process of the world's generation and destruction. Moreover, there are various different interpretations of "Kalpa" in different Buddhist scriptures. Generally speaking, Buddhism classifies "Kalpa" into three categories: Mahakalpa (Great Kalpa), Antarakalpa (Intermediate Kalpa), and Upakalpa (Small Kalpa). Eighty Antarakalpas make up one Mahakalpa, which consists of four phases: "Formation" (Sambhava), "Abiding" (Sthiti), "Decay" (Vibhava), and "Emptiness" (Sunyata). Each phase includes twenty Antarakalpas, and these four stages are also known as the "Four Kalpas". Quoted from Ye Luhua业露华 and Dong Qun董群. *Zhongguo Fojiao Baike Quanshu* (Volume 2) 中国佛教百科全书(第二卷). Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2000, p. 64.

13 As far as the author can see, this has been the only paper that focuses on *Jiujie Baojuan* so far.

14 *Jiujie Baojuan* (救劫宝卷), as one of the original Hexi Baojuan, was widely circulated in the Hexi region and most of them survived in the form of hand-copied books.

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Article

From Clever Rain Tree to Sacred Soundscape: Cosmic Metaphor and Spiritual Transformation in Takemitsu's Musical Visualizations

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Abstract: This article explores how Toru Takemitsu transforms literary and natural imagery into sacred soundscapes in his *Rain Tree Sketches*, drawing on Ōe Kenzaburō's short story "*The Clever Rain Tree*" as a starting point for musical meditation on nature and spirituality. This research employs three different approaches to study the transformation process. First, it traces the transformation of Ōe's literary symbols into Takemitsu's musical vocabulary while explaining how *Zen* aesthetics and Japanese *shizen* (nature) concepts unite text and sound domains. Second, it undertakes a systematic study of musical parameters in the composition to show how motivic development, textural transformation, and temporal organization express water imagery and embody the Zen principle of *ma* (emptiness). Third, it critically examines modern multimedia visualizations of *Rain Tree Sketches* to explore both the potential and the limitations of digital technology in mediating the composition's spiritual dimensions. The analysis demonstrates how Takemitsu created a modernist sacred space through musical techniques that enable listeners to experience transcendence via the deliberate orchestration of sound, silence, and suspended time. More broadly, it shows how modern composers can transform literary spiritual content into abstract musical compositions while preserving their meditative character. This article significantly expands upon preliminary ideas presented at KAMC 2024 conference, 2024, incorporating new theoretical frameworks, extensive analysis of spiritual dimensions, and critical examination of digital mediation not present in the original conference presentation.

Keywords: Toru Takemitsu; Rain Tree Sketch; spiritual expression; Zen aesthetics; Ma; visual art; metaphor

1. Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed Toru Takemitsu's emergence as a major Japanese composer whose works blend Western avant-garde elements with traditional Japanese aesthetics. Scholars agree that Takemitsu found deep spiritual meaning in Kenzaburō Ōe's (1980) short story "*The Clever Rain Tree*"[1], which reshaped his understanding of sacred creation in the piano work *Rain Tree Sketch* (Burt 2001; Enomoto 1995; Wang, 2024). Ōe's short story uses a single image—the rain tree whose leaves store water and drip slowly—to stage care, renewal, and continuity; this is the metaphor Takemitsu draws on.

According to our research, the transformation of Ōe Kenzaburō's literary vision into Takemitsu's sacred soundscape represents one of the most compelling examples of cross-

media spiritual expression in contemporary music. The term sacred soundscape, as used here, means a musical environment that combines natural images with meditative temporal elements and symbolic transcendence to produce spiritual awareness and contemplative states. Spiritual practice denotes a repeatable pattern of listening and performance that cultivates inward attention and ethical calm. Transcendental experience refers to an episode of heightened awareness of silence, time, and relation that cannot be reduced to concepts. The sacred names the set-apart quality of that experience in which ordinary sound takes on more-than-ordinary meaning. According to most scholars of his music, Takemitsu achieved two important things: he developed sophisticated compositional techniques and created sacred spaces that facilitated spiritual connection and self-reflection. These spaces evoke fundamental spiritual experiences through their connection to Japanese aesthetic traditions (Koozin 2002; Burt 2001; Hara 2020).

The work uses the "rain tree" image as a cosmic metaphor to convey its central message. The tree functions as a spiritual bridge between earth and heaven, demonstrating the ongoing cycle of spiritual development. According to Ōe's literary understanding, the "clever" tree uses its many leaves to collect water and drip it down, maintaining a continuous cycle of moisture that symbolizes the never-ending flow of spiritual energy (Enomoto 1995). The imagery offered an ideal metaphorical medium for Takemitsu to explore the interplay of musical abstraction with spiritual experience, of sound with silence, and of time with eternity.

This research begins with an examination of Takemitsu's spiritual foundations through his aesthetic philosophy and continues with an analysis of how Ōe's literary images become musical metaphors. It then studies the specific compositional methods that bear transcendent meaning and finally examines how modern multimedia visualization, used only as a supportive medium, can either heighten or distract from those spiritual aspects. The goal is to understand how abstract musical elements can convey deep spiritual meaning and transformative power for individual listeners. This article employs three analytical frameworks to investigate how spiritual content travels between artistic forms. Sections 2 and 3 establish the first framework by moving from Ōe's literary symbolism to Takemitsu's musical language and showing how Zen aesthetics and *shizen* act as philosophical connectors for cross-media spiritual transformation. Sections 4 and 5 analyze Takemitsu's musical composition through a systematic investigation of techniques that materialize spirituality, focusing on the use of *ma* (emptiness) as temporal organization and on the development of water imagery through motivic progression and textural change. Section 6 is based on the software Synesthesia-2 (2014 version) to propose and design a visualization concept for *Rain Tree Sketch*. By translating the acoustic characteristics of different passages in *Rain Tree Sketch* into specific visual logic, it establishes simulation techniques to concretize the imagery of water and *ma*. The conclusion and discussion section presents the core findings of this study regarding Toru Takemitsu's *Rain Tree Sketches*, and then illustrates its theoretical contribution to cross-media aesthetic communication through comparative analysis with existing research, and further discusses the potential and risks of digital visualization technology. Finally, the study's limitations are systematically identified, and future research directions are proposed details perspectives.

2. "Nature" (Shizen) as Sacred Principle

Toru Takemitsu positions the concept of "nature" (*shizen*) as the cornerstone of his musical aesthetics, functioning both as a spiritual foundation for creation and as an aesthetic principle. The meaning of "nature" in Takemitsu's music emerges when one understands the Japanese cultural sense of the concept and how it acquires modern musical significance.

The traditional Japanese cultural framework, while transformed by modernization, maintains a distinctive approach to the relationship between humans and nature that differs from Western post-Enlightenment perspectives (Karatani 1993). In contemporary Japan, *shizen* is rooted in the country's aesthetic and philosophical heritage. The Japanese framework forms a continuous bond between human beings and their natural surroundings that contrasts with Western traditions that tend to separate these elements. The Daijisen Dictionary (Matsumura, 1998) defines the term as follows:

a. The world of mountains, rivers, grasslands, trees, all those things that do not include humans, and those things that are not created by humans.
b. Everything between heaven and earth, including humans. The universe.

In *shizen*, the artist treats nature as a partner in making. The artist works with the given behavior of materials rather than forcing them. In music, this means following resonance, decay, and timbre instead of steering sound toward a fixed goal. This stance resists a strict subject to object split (Hayakawa 1973). It can support contemplative experience because it reduces the felt gap between maker, medium, and world and directs attention to how sound arises and fades. Nature functions as a fundamental principle in Zen art, according to the Zen scholar Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, because it includes both the natural environment that lacks human-made elements and the entire universe that contains humanity. The seemingly contradictory perspective directs people toward spiritual awakening by dissolving distinctions between artists and their artwork (Hisamatsu 1971).

Japanese garden design offers a clear example of *shizen* aesthetics. It establishes a natural environment that appears as if nature itself had opened the space, although it is human-made. This gardening philosophy represents the central meaning of "nature" as an aesthetic principle. Architect Masao Hayakawa explains in his foundational study:

> "*Japanese gardens are places where the human heart can come into direct, pure contact with the world of plants and flowers. One of their fundamental intentions is to inspire the emotion of rejoicing with these creations of nature and of figuratively blooming when they bloom*". (Hayakawa 1973, pp. 9–10)

Shizen aesthetics aims for artless art. This requires advanced technique to make something look completely natural.

The "nature" principle reaches its highest philosophical level in Zen temple gardens (such as Ryōan-ji), which serve as the ultimate manifestation of Japanese garden art. Dry-landscape gardens use minimal components such as white sand and stones to generate images of mountains, rivers, and seas that reveal boundless possibilities within limited space. The spiritual essence of this form uses abstract signs to help viewers grasp the core of nature. The garden avoids exact reproduction of natural scenes (Ronnen 2013).

Through the technique of "borrowed scenery," Japanese gardens demonstrate a unique relation to nature. Designers incorporate mountains and trees by using strategic arrangements to unite human-made structures with natural elements. The artistic significance of this method lies in its refusal to possess nature as a physical object; instead, it builds a dialogical connection with nature through artistic interpretation. In this sacred domain, human beings encounter nature in a space that transcends the notion of human domination over the natural world.

Japanese garden aesthetics deeply inspired Takemitsu's composition through his knowledge of these gardens. He viewed *shizen* as more than an aesthetic concept; it represented a spiritual approach within the process of musical composition. His widely cited musical metaphor offers insight:

> "*My music is like a garden, and I am the gardener. Listening to my music can be compared to walking through a garden and experiencing the changes in light, pattern, and texture*". (Takemitsu 1987, p. 201)

Through this garden metaphor, composing and listening work as repeatable acts of focused attention. These acts shape meditative listening spaces. Here, sacred denotes a set-apart attentional space in which ordinary sound takes on more-than-ordinary meaning. The garden–music concept manifests at three levels.

First, the creative process unfolds "naturally," like a living organism. The gardener avoids mechanical, predetermined blueprints and instead follows the natural growth of plants; the garden takes shape through interaction with nature. By "natural," Takemitsu means that he lets sound's own properties—resonance, decay, and timbre—suggest the next event. He follows local relations instead of steering toward a fixed goal. In this sense, development arises from listening into the material rather than forcing it. As he wrote,

> "*My music aims to exist as the natural law... I refuse to handle sound to lead it toward a singular objective. Instead I strive to release the sound to its maximum potential*." (Takemitsu 1971, p. 212)

Second, the structure is nonlinear. The strolling layout of Japanese gardens provides visitors with multiple paths and perspectives. Takemitsu developed this spatial design concept into an art that unfolds over time. The musical development in *Rain Tree Sketch* avoids the teleological structures of Western classical music, offering listeners multiple possible paths through the music. Each musical segment attains some independence while maintaining an organic relation to the whole.

Third, with limited elements, Japanese gardens produce limitless artistic conception that encourages imagination and exploration. Takemitsu's music explores the territory of words that have been used up but whose meanings remain open. In *Rain Tree Sketches*, the combination and development of basic musical elements yield layered sound imagery and a quiet, attentive listening space shaped by sustained tones, registral gaps, and rests.

3. Sacred Symbolism of the Cosmic Tree

"*The Clever Rain Tree*" by Kenzaburō Ōe articulates a spiritual cosmology that underlies Toru Takemitsu's musical composition. The literary image functions beyond its narrative role to establish a spiritual bridge between music and literature. The rain tree thus operates as an archetypal cosmic tree, or axis mundi, with deep cosmological meaning within Ōe's literary universe.

According to Oe's novel description the "ingenious tree" contains "hundreds of thousands of tiny leaves—finger-like" that "store up moisture while other trees dry up at once" (Ōe 1980, p. 4). The botanical description serves as a metaphor for spiritual strength, showing that the rain tree remains connected to transcendent nourishment sources when material and spiritual resources become depleted. The rain tree imagery draws on mythological archetypes across cultures. Literary scholars view it as a contemporary World-Tree representation that connects the underworld with the earth and heaven (Burt 2001; Enomoto 1995). The three-level cosmic framework represents both vertical spiritual order and the active linkages between spatial realms.

Peter Burt notes that Takemitsu found inspiration in the rain tree as a "poetic metaphor of fertility and growth," a way of evoking the "eternal recurrence" of natural cycles in musical form (Burt 2001, p. 205). The rain tree functions as a dynamic spiritual entity mediating between planes of existence; this is its symbolic power.

The creative partnership between Takemitsu and Kenzaburō Ōe demonstrates a distinctive mode of artistic communication rooted in shared aesthetic philosophy rather than

literal interpretation. Their collaboration operates through intuitive perception that allows artists to grasp essential meanings without analytical mediation. When Takemitsu encountered Ōe's rain tree metaphor, he responded not through systematic literary analysis but through immediate recognition of its contemplative essence.

In an interview with musicologist Jimmie W. Finnie, Takemitsu acknowledged the difficulty of explaining the relationship between *Rain Tree* and his own pieces: "It is hard to say, because I have not read it," he noted; nevertheless, "no relationship has to be established with the entire story of Clever Rain Tree" to explain the significance of the metaphor for his works (Finnie 1995, p. 67). The apparent paradox reveals a fundamental cognitive process in artistic creation. The Zen tradition's direct pointing appears in Takemitsu's natural comprehension of the rain tree symbol, allowing him to access essential truths without textual mediation. Artistic communication thus takes place beyond rational understanding through immediate spiritual perception of the image; complete textual reading is not required.

The transformation from Ōe's literary symbol to Takemitsu's musical metaphor constitutes a form of spiritual transduction: it converts visual and conceptual elements into auditory experiences while maintaining—and in some ways intensifying—the original contemplative power through the change in medium. Takemitsu's music translates the rain tree's cyclical collection and release of moisture into recurring thematic patterns that acoustically model natural cycles. Recurrence, spacing, and decay act as listening cues that help performers and audiences sustain steady attention. Through the temporal unfolding of sound, Takemitsu creates an acoustic environment that allows listeners to connect with natural rhythms through musical progression.

Takemitsu converts the rain tree's spiritual qualities into specific musical language in his solo piano compositions *Rain Tree Sketch* and *Rain Tree Sketch II*. The repeated, relatively static harmonic structures, using modal pitch collections and unresolved dissonances, and produce audible impressions of raindrops falling on leaves. Irregular rhythmic structures together with extended silences simulate natural processes that are asymmetrical and nonlinear (Koozin 2002). The opening marking "celestial light" calls for a pale, floating tone color. It guides touch, pedaling, and decay. Rather than demanding any particular spiritual state from the performer, it primarily shapes the intended sonority so the section sounds coherent; at the same time, it can implicitly cue a calm mental focus.

4. The Sacred Void of Ma

The spiritual aspects of Takemitsu's *Rain Tree Sketch* require understanding the traditional Japanese aesthetic idea of *ma* as the primary key to its musical structure. Takemitsu transformed the spatial–temporal concept of *ma* found in East Asian philosophy into a musical–spiritual method that turns abstract sound patterns into vehicles for transcendent experience.

According to the Iwanami Dictionary of Ancient Terms' definition:

> "*ma refers to the natural distance between two or more things existing in a continuity or the natural pause or interval between two or more phenomena occurring continuously*."
>
> (Iwanai Dictionary of Ancient Terms. quoted in Isozaki 1979)

However, such a dictionary entry offers only a basic explanation. In traditional Japanese culture, *ma* is an active void filled with possibility. Modern architectural theorist Arata Isozaki explains that ma functions as "the place where life is experienced," shaping the living environments of observers of this aesthetic (Isozaki 1979, p. 69).

The essential nature of *ma* becomes apparent through this explanation: it is a pregnant void filled with potential. Although the concept may initially seem foreign to

Western thought, it resonates with several Western philosophical and mystical traditions. Apophatic theology, particularly in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, approaches the divine through negation, finding fullness in apparent emptiness (Robert 2012). Takemitsu's achievement lies in making this productive emptiness directly experiential through musical structure, allowing listeners from any cultural background to encounter the generative potential of silence without philosophical training. This cross-cultural resonance suggests that Takemitsu's use of *ma* operates on broadly human rather than narrowly culture-specific principles of consciousness. The musical implementation of *ma* in *Rain Tree Sketches* therefore offers a practical demonstration of contemplative principles that philosophy has long theorized but has rarely made directly experiential. Through precise compositional techniques, Takemitsu turns abstract concepts into lived acoustic experience.

Takemitsu understood *ma* with both depth and originality. In a 1988 interview, he remarked:

> "*Ma cannot be dominated by a person, or by a composer. Of course, ma can never be determined. Ma is the mother of sound and should be very vivid. Ma is living space, more than actual space*." (Cronin and Tann 1988)

This statement reveals both his philosophical understanding of *ma* and how he transformed the concept into concrete compositional practices.

The various levels of *ma* become evident in the structure of *Rain Tree Sketch*. First, the composition relies on intervallic structures. Its deliberately constructed contemplative architecture emerges through Takemitsu's strategic deployment of silences and pauses. These silences serve specific compositional functions that extend beyond mere cessation of sound.

For instance, in Figure 1 (*MM*. 45–51), static soprano parts appear every two measures (mm. 45, 48, 51); together with the bass's sustained repetition of A, they create a unique temporal experience. The passage looks still yet holds built-up psychological energy that prepares the start of the next section. This is what Takemitsu termed "living space."

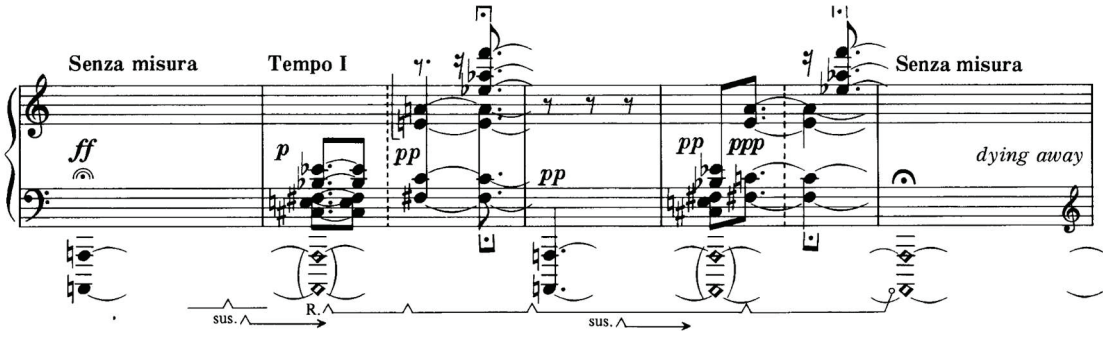

Figure 1. *Rain Tree Sketch I*, *MM*. 45–51.

Second, *ma* operates at the timbral level. Internal sound variation within traditional Japanese music receives utmost attention, and this concept finds contemporary expression in *Rain Tree Sketch I*. The phrase consisting of two identical sections in Figure 2 (*MM*. 80–84) demonstrates Takemitsu's deliberate approach to timbral development. The composer instructs performers to play the second occurrence "softer than before," together with detailed pedal directions. To achieve proper muting during the second repetition, the performer must use both the right pedal and the soft pedal. The technical support enables each sound to become a spiritual moment that listeners can experience deeply.

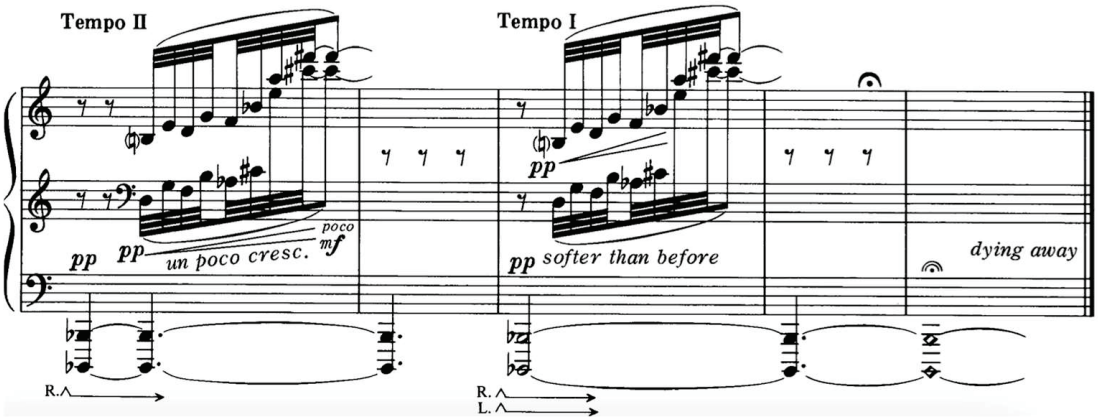

Figure 2. *Rain Tree Sketch I*, *MM*. 80–84.

In *Rain Tree Sketch*, *ma* shapes attention and the sense of time by translating Ōe's depiction of temporal suspension in the rain tree's moisture cycles into musical space. The same cues that work aesthetically may also support a quieter, more focused mode of listening. This is an invitation, not a guarantee, for every listener. The method produces an exceptional temporal encounter that helps people slip free of everyday time awareness and reach heightened states of attention.

This spiritual function is realized through several mechanisms. The combination of sonic sequences and silent intervals functions as a breathing rhythm, an organic wave that aligns with human mental patterns. The reappearance of textures in *Rain Tree Sketch II* from *MM*. 4–8 at *MM*. 6–7 (Figure 3) creates a dual experience of familiarity and novelty through registral expansion, leading listeners toward advanced listening and preparing sectional transformation.

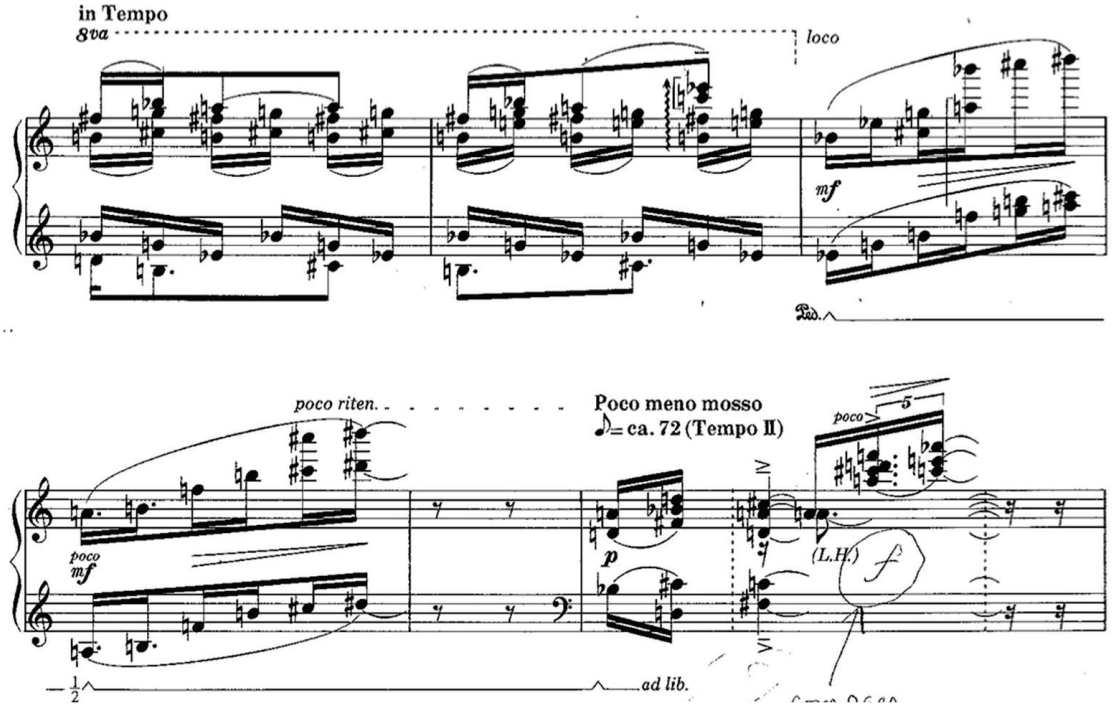

Figure 3. *Rain Tree Sketch II*, *MM*. 4–11.

Ma invites participatory listening. In many concert settings, listeners are observers of a fixed score. Here, *ma* invites active listening because it asks the listener to supply attention. Each rest opens a small space for reflection.

Through his use of *ma*, Takemitsu develops a musical language with broad spiritual reach. The piece includes no liturgical text, ritual frame, or confessional symbols. It relies on timing, color, and silence, which travel across settings. The design represents Takemitsu's spiritual vision by representing Japanese tradition while reaching beyond cultural boundaries. The achievement of universality occurs through the retention of cultural characteristics because it engages fundamentals of human consciousness. The silences generated by *ma* reveal the shared insight of many contemplative traditions: deeper awareness can arise in the gaps between thoughts. Whether Buddhist "śūnyatā" (emptiness), Christian mysticism's "sacred darkness," or Islamic Sufism's fanā (self-annihilation), these traditions testify to similar experiences (Taufiqurrohman 2024). Through his musical use of *ma*, Takemitsu invites contemporary audiences toward this shared contemplative dimension. Whether a listener attains it depends on context and practice.

5. The Metaphor of Water: Musical Transformation from Natural Phenomenon to Spiritual Symbol

Water constitutes an essential thematic element throughout Toru Takemitsu's aesthetics, directly inspired by Ōe's rain tree metaphor in which collected rainwater becomes the medium of memory and spiritual continuity. Throughout his career, from Water Music through the late "Rain" pieces, Takemitsu used water as a spiritual symbol that transcends mere depiction to convey philosophical meanings. Burt's discussion of the "sea of tonality" highlights Takemitsu's cultural grounding in Japanese water symbolism, which he used to develop his distinctive approach to musical fluidity (Burt 2001).

In Japanese spiritual tradition, water bears multiple layers of meaning. It is sacred in Shinto because it purifies and regenerates. Water basins (temizuya) at shrine entrances and waterfall ascetic practices (takigyō) show water as a means of purification extending beyond the physical to the spiritual. Water's flowing nature represents life's continual transformation.

According to Kōji Matsunobu, the musical practice of otodamaho teaches the purification of body and mind through natural sounds—including waterfalls, streams, and rain—and it deeply shaped Takemitsu's approach (Matsunobu 2007). Within Japanese aesthetics, water functions as an emotional symbol: tranquil surfaces signify peace, while moving surfaces suggest shifting emotion. With the arrival of Buddhism in Japan, water's formlessness came to exemplify emptiness.

Takemitsu built his musical representation of water through sustained philosophical study. He candidly acknowledged that "music has always had a connection to water, even from the early days" (Takemitsu 2000, pp. 454–56). Water and sound share physical traits: both are wave phenomena that display fluidity and permeability. Takemitsu drew technical inspiration from this similarity to develop musical techniques that replicate water's natural flow. He was also fascinated by water's transformations of state. Water exists as solid (ice), liquid (water), or gas (vapor), yet its molecular structure remains unchanged. The essential nature of music parallels this: music transforms through time while its inner structure persists. His finest works demonstrate that water-like surface changes can maintain deep unity beneath.

Among water's features, its capacity for "memory" particularly struck Takemitsu. According to Noriko Ohtake, water functions both as physical phenomenon and as a spiritual medium that transports memories and dreams. This poetic insight led him to explore sonic memory through musical development, allowing earlier sounds to leave traces that persist in later stages and create continuous temporal relationships (Ohtake 1993).

The water symbolism in *Rain Tree Sketch* exists through different musical approaches which demonstrate subtle implementation. Through his work on sound design Takemitsu

developed a liquid sonority. The sustain pedal combined with una corda techniques through continuous use enables different pitch sounds to combine in the piano resonance chamber thus achieving water-like sonic effects. At *M*. 53 (Figure 4) the entire sound organization shows no full serial pattern while the combined hand-generated sounds emerge from physical mixing rather than rapid scales or arpeggios. Every note enters this sound pool to produce waves before becoming part of the whole.

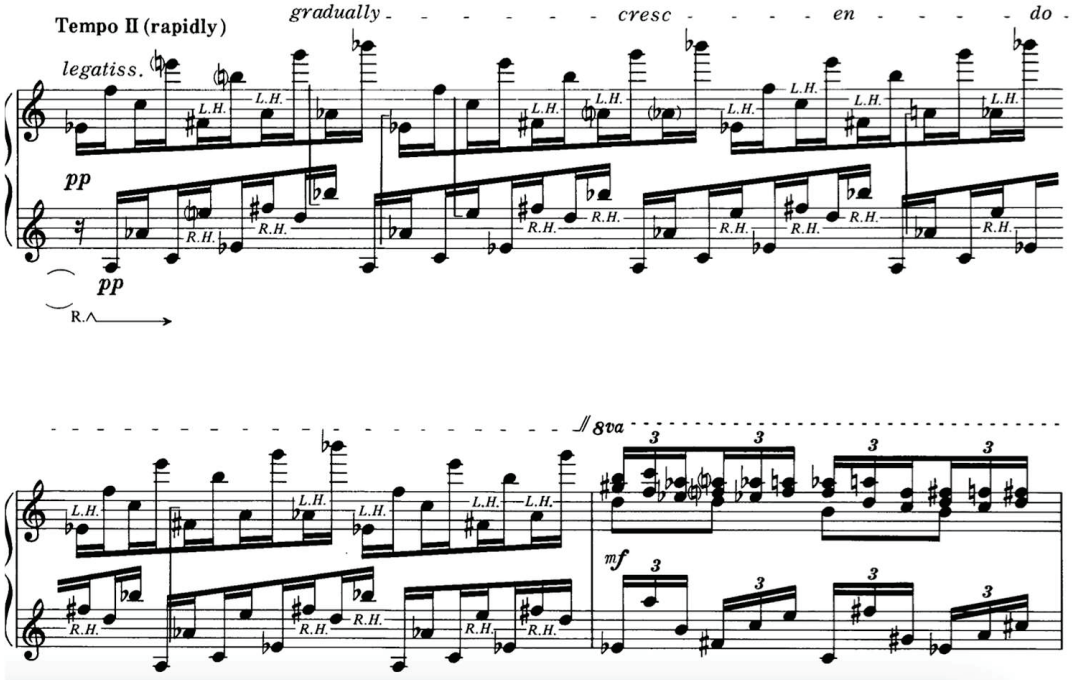

Figure 4. *Rain Tree Sketch I*, *MM*. 53–54.

Rhythmically, Takemitsu created dropping patterns. The rhythmic structure takes its direct origin from Japanese traditional music which emulates natural sounds. Notes drop like water droplets which maintain balanced patterns between expected patterns and unexpected occurrences. Takemitsu gives explicit instructions at *MM*. 42–44 (Figure 5) to "leggerissimo rapidly" while instructing players to keep sustain pedal pressed until the phrase ends thus producing a controlled yet natural sound.

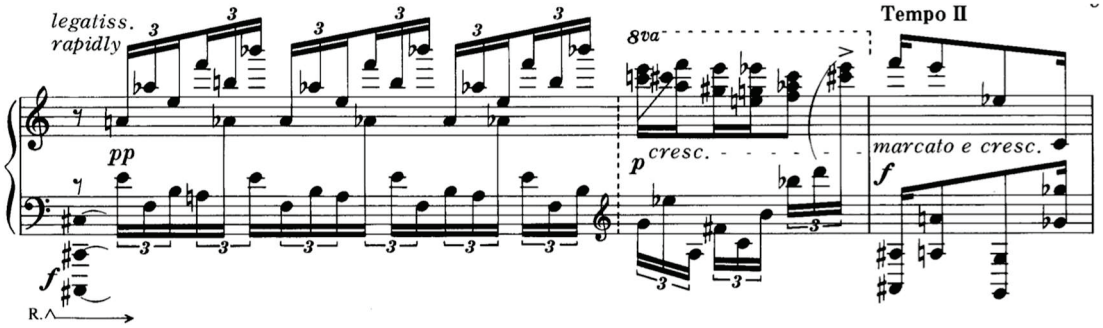

Figure 5. *Rain Tree Sketch I*, *MM*. 42–44.

Formally, the work employs a ripple-like design. Through pitch-class set analysis, Koozin shows how Takemitsu used octatonic collections and referential set complexes to produce motifs that ripple through time like stones cast into water (Koozin 2002). The sound waves transform subtly as they travel before fading into silence. Overall, *Rain Tree*

Sketches I and II consist of fragmented sections that alternate between Tempo I and Tempo II while maintaining organic connection through *ma*, dropping rhythms, and liquid sonority.

Water's temporal nature helped Takemitsu develop an original approach to musical time perception. According to Takemitsu, traditional Japanese music presents a perception of time that differs from Western norms: it is complex and multidimensional rather than linearly goal-directed (Takemitsu 1987). The returns in *Rain Tree Sketch* function as transformed repetitions that show water's ability to recollect new experiences with each cycle. The result is a spiral-shaped temporal experience. Philosopher Henk Oosterling connects the Japanese concept of *ma* to contemporary Western thought by demonstrating parallels with post-structuralist ideas of spacing or interval (Oosterling 2000). In this analysis, *ma* is not static emptiness but an active pause that generates meaning through what it holds apart. When Takemitsu places a silence between two phrases, it creates a charged space between sounds.

Performance of *Rain Tree Sketch* demands water-like thinking as the primary interpretive approach. Performers require specific technical training to achieve liquid sonority. The pedal functions beyond sustaining sound to blend attacks into continuous flow. Touch must adapt to the water state the musician aims to express.

At a spiritual level, performers cultivate a state of consciousness that resembles water's qualities: internally stable yet flexible in response to each sonic situation. As Christopher I. Lehrich argues, performance is a living process that goes beyond score reproduction; each performance flows like water along the same riverbed yet produces distinct variations (Lehrich 2014). Takemitsu turns the water image into method: droplet-like figures and sustained-pedal accumulations let multiple pitches overlap and blend, creating the acoustic equivalent of ripples on a surface. These techniques restructure temporal perception to mirror properties of flow, accumulation, and dispersion.

6. Digital Sacred Art: Technology as Spiritual Medium

Through the imagery of water and the temporality of *ma*, Toru Takemitsu elevates natural phenomena into spiritual symbols in music. However, this aesthetic often presents comprehension barriers in contemporary listening contexts. Not all listeners can directly grasp abstract sonic imagery and temporal blank space. Therefore this section proposes a visualization concept based on Synesthesia-2 to explore how this aesthetic might be presented in contemporary settings. The software can precisely map acoustic parameters to abstract geometric forms. It avoids narrative or excessive symbolic interference, aligning better with the aesthetic of emptiness in *ma*. Visual presentation can provide a pathway of understanding for listeners who struggle to perceive abstract sonic imagery directly. In our design, technology is used as a medium to assist music, which demonstrate how visualization can help audiences more intuitively experience the water symbolism and ma spacing in *Rain Tree Sketch* without disrupting its contemplative nature.

Educational research further indicates that visualization aids musical understanding. MIDI visualization helps identify subtle patterns difficult to detect through hearing alone (Heyen and Sedlmair 2020). Real-time keyboard visualization enhances learners' grasp of complex parameters (Bauer 2020). While these findings originate from educational contexts, their conclusions apply equally to *Rain Tree Sketch*. The water droplet imagery and temporal organization of ma in the work are precisely the type of structures that require additional visual cues yet must avoid over-interpretation, which means only describe what the music actually contains.

Against this background, we designed a visualization concept for *Rain Tree Sketch* based on Synesthesia-2. It directly converts acoustic parameters like pitch, loudness,

timbre, and rhythm into simple geometric movements. Synesthesia-2 eliminates the need for complex programming, freeing researchers to focus on debugging technical issues.

This allows them to focus on calibrating the visuals and ensuring they align with the musical soundscapes, such as water and *ma*. Compared to TouchDesigner, which requires complex programming, it is more accessible. Unlike Magic Music Visuals, which favors figurative patterns, its abstract output does not steal attention or introduce additional narratives and symbols. More crucially, its decay control allows visual elements to disappear at the same rate as sound, preventing visual afterimages from filling the negative space of *ma*. Therefore, Synesthesia-2 naturally aligns technically with water's fluidity and ma's gaps, suitable for presentation without disturbing the musical subject.

In the specific design, we transform acoustic characteristics of different sections into corresponding visual logic. The opening (measures 1–6) employs a vertical particle waterfall design (Figure 6). High-frequency notes are mapped as cool-colored light points slowly falling from the screen's top. As frequency decreases, light points transition to dark green or black, eventually disappearing as afterimages. This design simulates raindrops seeping into soil. We strictly control afterimage duration to completely synchronize with the piano sound's natural decay. This ensures *ma*'s silence is not filled by visual afterimages. The middle section (measures 45–51) employs breathing halo diffusion (Figure 7). The treble appears every two measures in this passage, combined with the sustained bass A, creating a unique floating sensation. We transform this musical structure into slowly diffusing concentric halos. When the treble appears, a pale blue light point generates at screen center, then expands outward at an extremely slow speed. The halo's transparency decreases as the diffusion radius increases, completely disappearing before the next treble note. The lbass A appears as a deep blue horizontal line at the screen bottom, its brightness subtly fluctuating with volume. This design reinforces Takemitsu's concept of *ma*. The visual elements' diffusion speed is precisely calculated to ensure the screen returns to stillness exactly when the music pauses. The repetition section (measures 80–84) employs mirrored projection with gradient transparency (Figure 8). This passage contains two identical musical materials, but the composer requires the second performance to be softer. We reflect this timbral difference through changes in visual transparency. During the first performance, visual elements appear at normal brightness, forming clear ripple patterns. When entering the second repetition, the same visual patterns reappear but with transparency reduced to 40% of the original. The ripple diffusion speed also slows accordingly. By reducing visual intensity, we maintain ma's negative space in repetition, avoiding visual interference with auditory meditation.

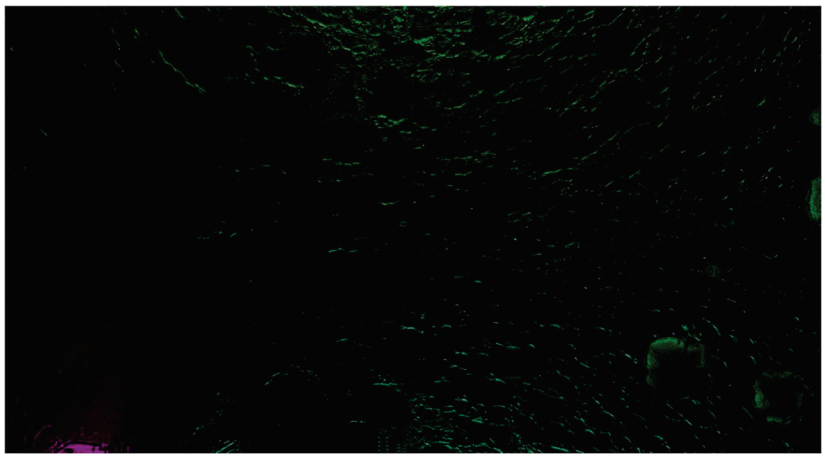

Figure 6. Visual in vertical particle waterfall.

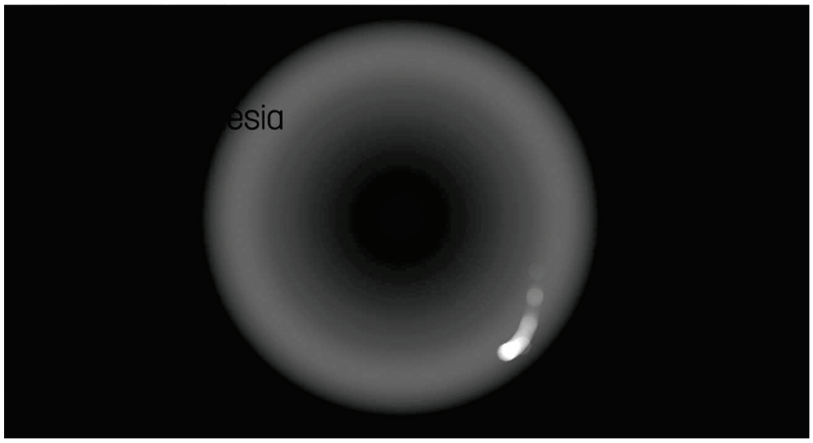

Figure 7. Halo Diffusion.

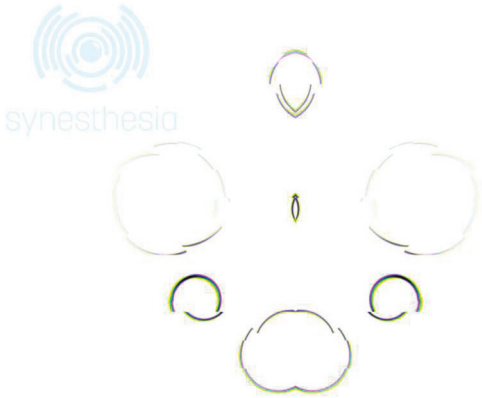

Figure 8. Gradient transparent mirror projection.

At the overall level, we establish a simple mapping between register and color. Low register notes appear as deep blue or dark green forms, evoking earth and deep sea imagery. High register notes appear as silver-white or pale gold light points, similar to starlight or morning dew. Middle register notes appear as cyan and sky blue. This color scheme maintains register recognizability while avoiding additional symbolic meaning. Additionally, we reinforce water imagery through fluid dynamics simulation. Each note produces concentric ripples that interfere with each other. Ripple size, diffusion speed, and duration depend on note characteristics. Greater volume produces more prominent ripples. Pedal layering creates more complex textures, echoing Takemitsu's pursuit of liquid sound. During rests, diffusion is strictly limited, allowing visuals to naturally dissipate in silence, preserving ma's emptiness. Audiences thus experience both the water surface as a note-mapping system and the dynamic presentation of rain washing ancient trees (Figure 9).

Accordingly, we summarize three design principles for visualization. First, visual decay must synchronize with acoustic decay. Second, ripple propagation speed gradually decreases until completely stopping when sound ceases. Third, projection brightness remains at appropriate levels, allowing audiences to equally clearly distinguish the disappearance of both sound and light.

Finally, we must emphasize technology's transparency. Visualization's responsibility is helping listeners notice music's inherent structure and imagery, not creating additional interpretations or effects. Visual presentation provides a path to understanding for listeners who have difficulty directly perceiving abstract sound images. Its purpose is to assist rather than replace the spiritual and structural experience of listening to music.

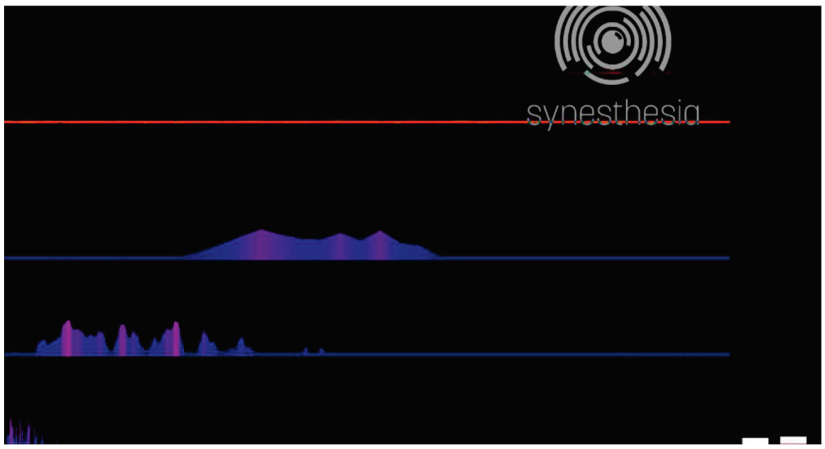

Figure 9. Visual in Ma.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examines the spiritual expression and visual presentation of Takemitsu's *Rain Tree Sketch*, proposing an integrated perspective combining literary symbolism, Japanese aesthetics, and digital technology. First, it clarifies the unique transformation of literary symbols into musical language, specifically how Takemitsu converts *Kenzaburō ōe*'s rain tree imagery into sonic experience. Second, it systematically analyzes the concrete application of ma in the work, demonstrating how this Japanese aesthetic concept creates contemplative space through musical techniques. Third, it proposes visualization design principles based on Synesthesia-2 software, exploring the possibilities and boundaries of digital visualization in presenting spiritual content.

Regarding the transformation between literature and music, this study identifies a more direct path of artistic communication. Previous research has interpreted Takemitsu's water imagery through cultural context and biographical events (Burt 2001). However, this study finds that Takemitsu's understanding of the rain tree metaphor derives from intuitive perception rather than rational textual interpretation. The dynamic imagery of the rain tree in the literature is translated into the piano's collection and release of sound. Thus, symbolic meaning continues through acoustic processes rather than additional narrative. The work's original meditative quality is thereby preserved.

Additionally, while existing research focuses primarily on compositional techniques or performance traditions, with Timothy Koozin emphasizing the octatonic system's role in harmonic organization (Koozin 2002) and Rui Hara exploring performance traditions and interpretive methods (Hara 2020). Our study takes a different path. It focuses on how digital media can assist in conveying Takemitsu's aesthetic thought. In contrast, this study concerns neither the pitch system itself nor performance operations alone. Instead, it explores how the abstract structure of ma can be perceived through digital visualization. To this end, we propose design principles based on Synesthesia-2: visual decay must synchronize with acoustic decay, the screen must return to stillness during rests, and brightness must remain moderate without exceeding boundaries. This methodology makes visualization a transparent aid. It allows listeners to more intuitively perceive water imagery and temporal negative space without weakening music's original contemplative quality.

However, visual assistance may also produce negative effects. Some listeners might develop dependence on visuals. Once accustomed to visual music, their patience and immersion in pure listening environments might decrease. The boundary between assistance and interference thus becomes subtle. Excessive visual stimulation easily fills the emptiness of *ma*. What was originally a meditative experience might become entertainment

performance. Technology overshadowing the main subject would destroy music's essence. Furthermore, cultural differences deserve attention. While the design principles proposed in this study draw on Japanese aesthetics, particularly the emphasis on intentional white space in ma and the continuity symbolized by water, their core lies in cross-cultural multimodal symbolism. This parallels the universal conventions of classical musical notation, highlighted earlier in this article. Classical notation relies on shared codes that transcend cultural boundaries, and our Svnesthesia-2 visualization extends this logic, serving as a graphical form of musical notation. This visualization transforms acoustic parameters into abstract visual signals that draw on shared sensory norms rather than specific cultural references, ensuring its core utility is not limited to the Japanese context. However, audience familiarity with Japanese aesthetic concepts may influence interpretation. Listeners unfamiliar with the concept of *ma* as active white space may interpret the corresponding visual representation as simply empty space. Therefore, further research on how Western or non-Japanese audiences perceive this visualization is valuable.

Overall, this study tracked the spiritual concept of *ma* through its expression in various media. The article began with the literary symbolism of the rain tree in Kenzaburō Ōe's story. It then analyzed how Tōru Takemitsu translated this image and its underlying spiritual principles into the musical language of *Rain Tree Sketch*. Finally, it explored how digital visualization can represent the music's structure, offering a contemporary method for perceiving its contemplative qualities.

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Notes

[1] Ōe's short story works in literary fiction and uses a single image, the clever rain tree whose leaves store water and drip slowly, to stage care, renewal, and continuity; this is the metaphor Takemitsu draws on.

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A Study of Spiritual Expression in Totemic Art: Based on a Multidimensional Analysis of Sublime Beauty, Humanistic Beauty and Artistic Beauty

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Abstract: Totemic art, as the fundamental medium of the spiritual realm of primordial societies, employs its distinctive symbolic system to communicate and articulate humanity's spiritual understanding and sacred quest for nature, the cosmos, and the essence of existence. This article centers on totemic art, which, through the three dimensions of sublime beauty, humanistic beauty, and artistic beauty, establishes a spiritual dialogue system between primitive tribes and supernatural forces. The core principle is the aesthetic metamorphosis of the spiritual realm through material carriers. It explores how it functions as a potent medium for articulating both personal and communal spirituality: sublime beauty manifests and materializes the intangible divine force through the "presenting the unpresentable," thus establishing the spiritual basis of primal reverence; Humanistic beauty, rooted in familial connections, the celebration of life, and community unity, facilitates the awakening and elevation of both individual and collective consciousness, promoting the integration and symbiosis of personal spirituality and communal sanctity; Behind the evolution of styles and the characteristics of anti-aesthetics in the artistic beauty, there remains the fundamental logic of serving spiritual expression. Research indicates that totemic art serves as the fundamental aesthetic practice of primitive societies for comprehending the world, engaging with the divine, and achieving mental tranquility. The three dimensions of its spiritual expression collectively form a spiritual monument of early human civilization.

Keywords: totemism; totemic art; spiritual expression; sublime beauty; humanistic beauty; artistic beauty

1. Introduction

Totem, as the core symbol of the spiritual world of the primitive people, is not only a simple clan mark or decorative pattern, but also a complex spiritual symbol system integrating the cosmology, life view, and social structure. Grounded in animism, they represented a focused manifestation of primitive societies' reverence and inquiry into the forces of nature, the enigmas of existence, and the destiny of their community. Totemic art, with its strong visual impact and profound spiritual connotations, has become a core bridge connecting the visible and invisible worlds and the mundane and sacred realms. This study examines the three principal aesthetic dimensions of sublime beauty, humanistic beauty, and artistic beauty present in totemic art. It amalgamates these three perspectives for the first time into a framework for examining the spiritual functions of totemic art. By integrating theories from art anthropology, religious studies, and aesthetics, it thoroughly

examines how these components collaboratively shape and articulate the distinctive perceptions and expressions of primitive societies concerning spirituality and the sacred.

2. Totemism, Totemic Art and Spiritual Expression

2.1. Totemism

Karl Marx once said, "At the same time it is consciousness of nature, which first appears to men as a completely alien, all-powerful, and unassailable force, with which men's relations are purely animal and by which they are overawed like beasts" (Marx and Engels 1969, p. 32). This passage elucidates the relationship between primitive humans and the natural world. During that period, humans were as powerless as animals against nature, compelled to unconditionally accept its formidable force. When primitive humans faced disasters from unusual natural phenomena, experienced impotence in activities like hunting, and confronted survival pressures, they began to seek a sacred power capable of overcoming nature's threats, subsequently praying to and venerating it. Religion emerged along this trajectory, with primitive societies centering their spiritual beliefs around totemism.[1]

It is well known that the word totem is taken from the Ojibwa, an Algonquin language of the region to the north of the Great Lakes of northern America. The expression ototeman, which means roughly, "he is a relative of mine" (Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 18). Primitive societies believed that clans were associated with specific animals, plants, or objects, which they esteemed as protectors and symbols of their clans, holding them in high reverence. These items served as the totems of the clans. The general notion of totemism was introduced in anthropology by McLennan (1869, pp. 194–216). In *The Worship of Animals and Plants*, McLennan defined totemism as the oldest animist belief whilst granting it universal validity (Palacio-Pérez 2012, pp. 682–714). The research findings on totems constitute a significant theoretical advancement in anthropology during the 20th century. Totems represent a rudimentary belief system universally found among early humans. Over time, totems transformed into a rudimentary ideology, profoundly infiltrating all facets of primitive human existence and exerting a significant impact on cultural development. They establish the basis of primitive culture and serve as the archetype of contemporary human culture (Zhu 2002, p. 2). For instance, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim contended that, in comparison to animism and nature worship, the totem system constitutes a "more fundamental and more primitive cult" (Durkheim 1995, p. 85) and is the fundamental form of religion. D.E. Khaytun, a Soviet scholar, noted that "Totemism is the religion of primitive clans, characterized by the belief that the clan descends from a mythical ancestor—part human, part beast, part human, part plant, or an inanimate entity, or a being, animal, or plant capable of transformation" (Khaytun 2004, p. 72). Consequently, totemism can be considered a significant manifestation and mode of veneration of the sacred and spiritual by primitive societies. Since the late 18th century, archaeological and anthropological evidence has consistently emerged, uncovering analogous totemic phenomena across Europe, Asia, North Africa, South America, Polynesia, and Eskimo communities. Academics have started to acknowledge that the system they are examining possesses "some universal significance" (Durkheim 1995, p. 120). As research progressed, anthropologists found that totems served not only as symbols of emotional connection and spiritual conviction among primitive tribal groups, but also led to the establishment of various taboos, including "totem killing" and "exogamy."[2] These taboos functioned as the "laws" of primitive societies, preserving interpersonal relationships among tribal members and governing their conduct. For instance, Chinese anthropologist Cen Jiawu, drawing from extensive historical data, identified four principal characteristics of totemism.

> 1. Primitive peoples' social groups give names to specific animals and plants because they think they are the group's ancestors or are blood relatives. 2. The group's members hold the animals and plants that represent the totem ancestors in high regard, and nobody dares to kill, maim, or otherwise damage them. There is a specific penalty for breaking this regulation. 3. People who belong to the same totem group share the same views about the totem and can be considered a full community. The same totem beliefs are expressed in the same way via body ornaments, everyday kitchenware, and cemetery and home decorations. 4. After reaching a certain age, men and women participate in a totem initiation rite. Furthermore, an absolute exogamy system is in place, and marriage between men and women in the same totem group is forbidden.
>
> (Cen 1986, p. 1)

It is not difficult to see that these characteristics, in addition to emphasizing the belief in totems, are also reflected in the social life of primitive people. Therefore, some scholars believe that totemism is not only a religious belief but also a social system of primitive people. In his research on Iroquois clan organization, American anthropologist Morgan noted that "the phratry, among the Iroquois, was partly for social and partly for religious objects" (Morgan 1964, p. 1). Morgan posited that the Iroquois clan constituted a cohesive religious and social entity, asserting that totemism, as a fundamental aspect of primitive tribal existence, should adhere to this principle. Even more to the point, British classical anthropologist Frazer noted that "Totemism is not only a religious belief but also a social structure" (Frazer 1887, p. 3). He posits that, from a religious standpoint, individuals possess an inherent sense of reverence and safeguarding towards totems. From a sociocultural standpoint, totems signify the connections among members of a singular tribe while also delineating the relationships that ought to exist between disparate tribes. Cen Jiawu, Morgan, and Frazer all assert that the social characteristics of totemism hold equal significance to its religious beliefs. Despite ongoing debates[3] in academic circles regarding the fundamental nature of totemism—where some contend it is chiefly a religious belief while others assert it is primarily a social institution—it is evident that the two are not mutually exclusive. Historical evidence and anthropological perspectives indicate that religious beliefs and social institutions are intrinsically linked in the genesis of totemism.

2.2. Totemic Art

The advent of totemism catalyzed significant human development and profoundly impacted the emergence of the "aesthetic sense," a more advanced human emotion. As Qiu Zhensheng said:

> Totemism, on the one hand, promoted the emergence of artistic forms and standardized existing ones, thereby enhancing their expressiveness and appeal. On the other hand, it gradually freed primitive people from their natural state and led them to transition to a social state, creating the preconditions for human aesthetic activities.
>
> (Qiu 1994, pp. 73–91)

From a temporal standpoint, archaeological evidence indicates that totemism originated in the Middle Paleolithic period and thrived during the Late Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods. The extensive cave paintings and sculptures from the Paleolithic era found in Europe validate that totem rituals and dances were varied and dynamic during that period (He 2008, p. 70). With the knowledge that Paleolithic people were responsible for works of art, it became essential to explain, somehow, how such an apparently "advanced" activity could have existed among such obviously "primitive" people (Abadía

2006, p. 124). We know that the emergence of art is directly linked to aesthetic consciousness, and a wealth of historical materials further prove that the origin of art is closely tied to totemism. Boas once discussed whether it was the social activities of totemism that drove the development of art, or whether art drove the development of totemism. He concluded that, "Our observations make it seem plausible that the particular symbolic development of art would not have occurred, if the totemic ideas had been absent" (Boas 1922, pp. 280–81). Zheng Yuanzhe also stated, "From the preceding discussion, I am compelled to draw the following preliminary conclusion: Totemic consciousness or concepts were the profound motivation behind the earliest artistic activities, and art originated from the primitive religious concept of totemism" (Zheng 1992, p. 48). Zhang Shengbing also mentioned in his research that totemic art originated alongside the widespread totemism that characterized primitive clan societies. This inevitably led to fundamental differences between this art form and today's art, both in terms of content and form (Zhang 2004, pp. 62–65). Today's art forms, such as painting and sculpture, can mostly find corresponding traces in totemism activities. "Some of them were born from totemism activities, some were standardized within totemism, and some are embodiments of totems themselves. Consequently, scholars define the primitive art shaped by totemic beliefs as 'totemic art.'" (Qiu 1994, p. 77). For example, Romanian scholar Tănase pointed out, "Totemism stimulated primitive art, especially the creation of images of totems, plants, and animals" (Tănase 1984, p. 5). Chinese scholar Cen Jiawu stated, "Art is an ideology that conforms to specific production relations, and its mode of production is inextricably linked to the mode of material production. The emergence, development, and extinction of totemic art remain entirely incomprehensible without the discovery of totemic facts" (Cen 1986, p. 1). It can be seen that numerous scholars categorize the artistic endeavors originating from totemism during the totemic period as "totemic art."

From this viewpoint, totemism, totemic art, and aesthetic consciousness are interrelated and mutually enhancing. The esteemed Chinese aesthetician Zhu Di also examined the interconnection among these three concepts. He held the conviction that:

> Totems and taboos significantly impact the evolution of aesthetics. This influence can be categorized into two components. The initial aspect is practical: totemism directly contributed to the development of various art forms linked to this belief system, or to the standardization of pre-existing art forms. The alternative is spiritual. If totem taboos were the earliest legal codes for humanity, they would undoubtedly have a significant impact on the human spirit. This initial code of laws transformed barbarians from a natural condition into a moral condition, facilitating the progression to an aesthetic condition.
>
> (Zhu 1988, p. 98)

Mr. Zhu Di's elucidation aligns with the principles of historical progression. Totemic art originated from totemism. Adherents employed art to materialize totems and sacred objects, enhancing their allure to fulfill the psychological requirements of the worshipers. Hegel stated, "The pure appearance of art has the advantage that it points through and beyond itself and itself hints at something spiritual of which it is to give us an idea" (Hegel 1975, p. 9). Totemic art visually and spiritually reinforced the sacred psychology and spiritual expression of primitive humans, thereby intensifying the religious essence of totemism. Aesthetic awareness also evolved during this process, allowing it to manifest and attain autonomy. Secondly, the advent of totemism supported the operation and evolution of human social structures. Mr. Zhu Di's reference to the transition from a natural state to a moral state was, in fact, the shift from "natural man" to "social man." This process significantly enhanced human psychology and consciousness, establishing the groundwork for the development of aesthetic consciousness. Totemic art also served a

social function in primitive clans, such as differentiating between various clans and marking coming-of-age ceremonies. The ideas and concepts of primitive peoples were continually refined and evolved through social practices, which were subsequently manifested in Totemic art, thereby influencing its transformation and variation. Consequently, in the context of totemism, totemic art is involved in both religious activities and social life, and has thus become an important part of the social life of primitive peoples. Totemic art has consequently become a significant aspect of the existence of primitive societies. Mr. S. Brent Plate astutely observed that aesthetic experience cannot be bracketed out as an autonomous realm of human religious existence because it always exists in a dialogical relation with language, cognitive capacities, religious practices, political ideologies, technological developments, and economic conditions (Plate 2005, p. 4).

2.3. The Spiritual Expression of Totemic Art

Totemic art represents the fundamental expression of humanity's early spiritual realm. It employs concrete or abstract symbols as a medium to establish a comprehensive spiritual cognitive framework. These artistic expressions represent not only the tangible embodiment of primitive religion but also a crucial component of clan social dynamics, serving as a conduit through which our ancestors comprehended the cosmos, the genesis of life, and the connection between humanity and deities. This is a comprehensive analysis derived from pertinent archaeological artifacts from China and the West (Table 1).

Table 1. Archaeological Discoveries of Animism in the East and West.

Performance Dimensions	Chinese Archaeological Evidence	Western Archaeological Evidence	Common Essence
Nature worship	Records of mountain and river worship in oracle bone inscriptions	Stonehenge healing worship, Greek Dionysus natural rituals	Personification and ritualization of natural phenomena
Ancestral spirits	Human sacrifice system in Yinxu, ancestor worship in bronze inscriptions of the Zhou dynasty	Mycenaean shaft grave burial goods, Roman household guardian altar	The soul of the deceased continues to exist and influence the living
Witchcraft practices	Shang Dynasty bronze vessel casting rituals, oracle bone divination system	Cave hunting witchcraft ruins, Mediterranean harvest rituals	Interaction between humans and spirits through rituals
Spirit vessels	Bronze ritual vessels from the Shang and Zhou dynasties as mediums for communication with the spirits	As a sacred object, the Churinga Flint as the "stone of the soul"	Certain substances contain spiritual power

At the inception of human civilization, primordial forebears confronted an enigmatic and capricious natural environment, cultivating a spiritual perspective rooted in animism. British anthropologist Edward Tylor systematically advanced this thesis, considering it the foundation of all religious beliefs and the central principle of diverse religious consciousnesses. Taylor characterizes animism as "the belief in souls that surpass the physical existence of living entities, along with various spiritual beings," and points out that "Animism is, in fact, the groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of savages up to that of civilized men" (Tylor 1871, p. 385). Taylor posited that deities were perceived as governing natural phenomena and human existence, including the afterlife, while also facilitating communication with humanity. Human conduct may either appease or incite the deities' wrath. This conviction inevitably resulted in human veneration of the deities or appeals for compassion. Consequently, animism encompasses beliefs in souls, the afterlife, and both major and minor deities, ultimately resulting in distinct forms of worship.

The rich archaeological findings in China offer systematic proof of animism. For instance, regarding the veneration of natural spirits, the Shang Dynasty had established a pantheon of deities associated with heaven and earth. Oracle bone inscriptions, such as "conducting bonfires to venerate the Yellow River" (*Liao Yu He* 燎於河) and "seeking blessings from the mountain" (*Qi Yu Yue* 祈於嶽), indicate that mountains and rivers were attributed with divine significance. The book of *Zuo Zhuan-First Year of Zhao Gong* (*Zuo Zhuan Zhao Gong Yuan Nian* 左傳·昭公元年) clearly records, "When faced with disasters such as floods, droughts, and epidemics, people would worship the gods of mountains and rivers. When faced with snow, frost, wind, and rain out of season, people would worship the gods of the sun, moon, and stars." 山川之神, 則水旱癘疫之災, 於是乎禜之; 日月星辰之神, 則雪霜風雨之不時, 於是乎禜之 (Zuo 2012, p. 1570). The book of *Li Ji-Ritual Law* (*Li Ji Ji Fa* 禮記●祭法) also records, "Any mountain, forest, valley, or hill that can produce clouds, cause wind and rain, or display unusual phenomena can be called a god." 山林川谷丘陵, 能出雲, 為風雨, 見怪物, 皆曰神 (Wang 2016, p. 600). The artistic expression of natural spiritualization is evident in the decorative motifs of Shang and Zhou dynasty bronze ware, where symbols like thunder, clouds, and dragons represent spiritual manifestations of natural forces.

In terms of spiritual cognition related to life, the painted pottery basin with human face and fish patterns from the Banpo site blends human faces with fish bodies, thereby creating the totemic image of "human face and fish body." Depicting their ancestors—the totem—as half-human, half-fish figures indicates that they believed themselves to be the descendants of the union between humans and fish (Gao 1984, pp. 63–67). This suggests a mutual interpenetration of life between the "fish people" or ethnic group and the fish totem, reflecting the kinship between humans and totemic species. The painted pottery featuring human faces and fish patterns discovered at the Beishouling site depicts a struggle between a bird and a fish, with the bird pecking at the fish's tail, and the two evenly matched, it is difficult to tell who will win (Zhao 2000, pp. 13–15). It shows the order of "both struggle and coexistence" between the two clan totems, with the bird's beak tightly clasping the fish's tail, symbolizing the unity of survival competition and ecological balance. Within the cultural framework of China's Li minority group, frogs, noted for their prolific reproductive capacity, are esteemed as symbols of maternal divine potency. Stone ancestral vessels, resembling male genitalia, embody the spiritual power of ancestral deities. Collectively, they represent a symbol of the life cycle. The sacrificial rituals documented in oracle bone inscriptions suggest that the Shang Dynasty people believed souls necessitated material vessels for spiritual communication with deities. Scholars have interpreted the animal-face patterns on bronze ritual vessels as "spiritual medium totems for communicating with deities." The bronze casting process was inherently spiritual; the extensive bronze casting workshop unearthed at the Xindian site in Anyang featured sacrificial pits and oracle bone remnants, affirming the integration of "technical production" and "shamanic rituals."

Western archaeological findings include numerous remains that strongly align with Taylor's animistic theory, with cave paintings serving as the most illustrative example. The cave paintings at Lascaux, France, and Altamira, Spain, vividly illustrate the magical rituals predominantly influenced by animism. These subterranean caves, challenging to access, house an array of paintings illustrating wild buffalo impaled by spears, kneeling herds of deer, and various other depictions. Sacrificial piles and animal remains are frequently discovered beneath the murals. These images were evidently not produced "for art's sake," but functioned as ritualistic vessels aimed at attaining hunting success through the mimicry of witchcraft. Primitive hunters posited that depicting wounded prey could potentially affect the hunt's outcome, illustrating Taylor's principle of "like attracts like."

Some caves exhibit hybrid human–animal figures, like the "bird-headed shaman" in Lascaux, indicating the intermediary function of shamans in witchcraft. This amalgamation of human and animal forms directly embodies the concept of the "oneness of life" in animism.

The decoration of tools from the late Paleolithic era reveals the emergence of spiritual awareness. Bone carvings from the Aurignacian culture exhibit recurring sawtooth and spiral motifs, which scholars interpret as abstract depictions of "water waves" and "snakes," indicating a veneration for the spiritual potency of nature. The megalithic structures of Stonehenge in Neolithic Britain are thought to have therapeutic properties. Archaeologists have uncovered numerous human bones exhibiting pathological injuries in the area, substantiating its role as a "spiritual healing center." Prehistoric burial practices in Europe directly indicate a belief in the soul's immortality. The Neanderthal burial site at La Chapelle-aux-Saints in France contains deceased individuals interred in a fetal position, alongside flint tools and animal bones, indicating a preparation for an afterlife. The spiritual expression of totemic art represents the cognitive framework established by humans during the Dark Ages to delineate the relationship among humanity, nature, and the supernatural. Totemic art, as humanity's primordial spiritual language, serves as both a manifestation of a particular era and a determinant of the continuity of civilization's logic. In light of modern civilization's ecological crises and spiritual disconnection, it is essential to reassess the spiritual significance of totemic art. This fundamental and universal wisdom may serve as the spiritual foundation for restoring the harmonious relationship between modern humans and nature.

3. The Sublime Beauty of Totemic Art: Reverence for Life and the Sacred

In the totemic traditions of early societies, totems were perceived as both ancestral figures with blood relations to the clan and deities capable of invoking benefits and averting calamities for the clan. Consequently, the paramount elements of prehistoric peoples' existence and survival were contingent upon their totems. According to Feuerbach, "This dependence forms the basis of religion" (Feuerbach 2019, p. 14). This totemistic devotion is the primary reason many historians consider totemism the initial manifestation and even the genesis of religion. As mentioned above, totemic art originated alongside totemism. The sublime emotions generated by this fervent devotion to nature and the divine are an important feature of the aesthetic appeal of totemic art in this context. As Zheng Yuanzhe said, "During the totemism period, primitive people were unable to completely control nature, but they had already gained their first spiritual enlightenment. This sense of the sublime for nature was only a step away from the beauty of totemic art" (Zheng 1992, p. 159).

What prompted prehistoric people to venerate a natural thing as a totem? The rationale resides in its capacity to evoke the spiritual and holy sentiments of primitive peoples. A totem's principal attribute is its function as a "symbol or device" (Morgan 1964, p. 170) that differentiates oneself and one's clan from others, possessing clear practical value. For early societies, the totemic picture represented the utmost sacredness. When a specific animal or plant was venerated as a totem, it transformed into an object of reverence for early societies. Nonetheless, this does not indicate that these natural objects exhibit any distinctive qualities relative to other species; they are merely commonplace goods. This indicates that their sanctity does not originate from the natural items themselves. What is more essential is that this animal or plant can elicit a profound sense of veneration in individuals. Recognition as a sacred object might evoke similar emotions in adherents. The manifestation of this emotion confers holiness upon the sacred thing. Consequently, it is plausible to conceive that throughout the veneration of their totems, they were not revering anthro-

pomorphized animals, but rather human beings that had been animalized—the esteemed spirits of their forebears (Hang 2009, p. 120). This explains why the representation of the totem, albeit lacking life, can yet evoke the prayers and veneration of primitive peoples during ritualistic practices, on totem poles, and in quotidian existence. Consequently, the significance lies in the holiness intrinsic to the totem object, rather than the object itself. In essence, nothing is intrinsically sacred or holy, yet nothing is inherently incapable of attaining sacredness or holiness. Durkheim asserted, "The sacredness exhibited by the thing is not implicated in the intrinsic properties of the thing: It is added to them" (Durkheim 1995, p. 230). Primitive societies venerated the sanctity represented by the totem, rather than the totem itself.

The prevalent interpretation of this holiness derives from Taylor's "animism," a doctrine focused on the notion of the soul. Over time, the soul evolved into spirits or gods with superhuman powers, and they may obtain the sight of spectral beings, from whom they look to gain spiritual knowledge and even worldly power (Tylor 1871, p. 402). This perspective has been contested. Durkheim rejected the notion that the concept of the sacred stemmed from primitive peoples' inability to differentiate between the living and the nonliving, nor did he endorse the idea that it was a product of their daily delusional states. Durkheim asserted that this holiness derives from a genuine but imperceptible "force." This enigmatic energy is generally perceived by indigenous populations, as demonstrated by terms such as "Wakan" among American tribes, "Mana" in Melanesia, and "Orenda" within the Iroquois, all of which reference this elusive force (Durkheim 1995, pp. 203–5).

The joyful and enthusiastic condition of primitive people during their assembly activities, also known as a "corroboree" (Durkheim 1995, p. 217), is the source of this mysterious power, according to a wealth of anthropological information. In "*The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*," Spencer and Gillen documented the Warlungu people's religious rite, "A very wild and savage scene that is impossible to describe in words was created by the billowing smoke, the flaming torches, the sparks flying everywhere, and a group of individuals shouting and dancing as their bodies were covered with odd paint" (Spencer and Gillen 1904, p. 391). In this moment of profound joy and exhilaration, prehistoric humans disengaged from the mundane world and transcended into a hallowed, spiritually infused domain. In this condition, the quotidian existence of primitive individuals was infused with sanctity, momentarily attaining "oneness" with the deities they venerated in ceremonies. The modest condition of uncultivated primeval individuals in nature attained a remarkable elevation, reaching an unparalleled pinnacle. The unique energy that allowed primitive individuals to attain this state of ecstatic frenzy was referred to as the power of "Wakan" and "Mana." In other words, this force experienced in collective pleasure allowed prehistoric humanity to transcend the commonplace and encounter spirituality. Nevertheless, the problem resides in the discontinuity of such gatherings. In contrast to the monotonous existence of daily survival, religious ceremonies, including sacrifices and assemblies, were performed periodically. Consequently, after the assembly ended, the euphoria and elation—or the hallowed feeling of connection with the divine—felt during the event would slowly diminish. To preserve the continuity of these emotions and perpetually recall the exalted sensation of transcending their humble status and attaining "oneness" with the divine, primitive peoples required pictures and symbols that might inspire this sense of sanctity. Simultaneously, in contrast to the abstract and intangible essence of sacred power, these symbols and pictures needed to be solid and palpable, thereby giving rise to totemic art.

3.1. The Beast-Face Patterns on Chinese Bronze Ware

Totemic art converts the uncontrollable forces of nature into a tangible "sacred presence" through exaggerated proportions (the vertical elongation of totem poles), threatening imagery (the ferocious faces of African masks), and abstract symbols (spiral patterns representing cosmic energy). The beast-face patterns on Chinese bronze wares (Figure 1), particularly from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, are a visual embodiment of archaic religious beliefs and spiritual ideas. They are exemplary specimens of bronze ware embellishment, epitomizing the pinnacle of this art form. As we all know, the primary importance of sacrificial rituals is in establishing an unrealistic environment inside the real world, which facilitates a connection with the divine realm, hence transmitting human desires and divine directives. The artifacts present in this context (copper vessels utilized for sacrificial ceremonies throughout the Shang and Zhou dynasties), particularly those adorned with pictorial embellishments, fundamentally function to provide an environment conducive to the manifestation of non-realistic deities (Hang 2009, p. 124). Consequently, the primary aim of the beast-face motif is to establish a connection between humans and deities. The formal language is replete with analogies for the enigmatic divine, amalgamating traits of numerous formidable creatures: oxen, sheep, deer, tigers, dragons, and others (Liu 2001, p. 156). It consolidates the sacred qualities of diverse animals into a higher-dimensional spiritual vessel, representing the amalgamation of divine power based on the belief in the spirituality of all entities, and deeply reflecting the ancient peoples' reverence for supernatural forces and their quest for understanding the spiritual realm.

Figure 1. The beast-face patterns. Displayed in the Shanghai Museum (East Hall), Shanghai, China. Photo source: Photo taken by the author.

3.2. The Churinga, a Sacred Object of the Australian Aborigines

Comparable expressions are also present in Western anthropological literature. The Churinga (Figure 2) is a pivotal sacred artifact for the Arrernte and other Aboriginal Australian communities, usually an oval-shaped stone or wooden plaque adorned with elaborate totemic designs. The predominant theory posits that the Churinga functions as a spiritual repository for the souls of ancestors. It serves as both a concrete vessel for clan totems and a significant embodiment of fundamental spiritual expression.

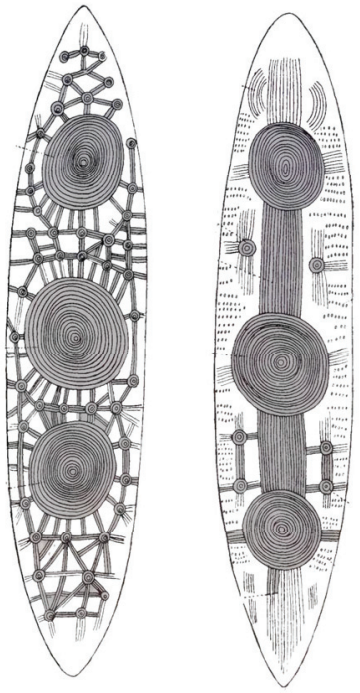

Figure 2. The Churinga, a sacred object of the Australian aborigines. Photo source: after (Spencer and Gillen 1904, p. 146), redrawn by author.

Spencer and Gillen noted in their book that the Aranda tribe, the dominating tribe among the primitive tribes in central Australia, always employs a unique ceremonial instrument in their ceremonies. It is known as the "spirit store" by the Aranda tribe. In size and shape, they differ greatly. The smallest will be perhaps three or four inches in length; the longest, five feet or more. In the Aranda tribe, all, with very rare exceptions, are more or less flattened and either oval (rarely roughly circular) in outline or, most usually, elongate with either end tapering to a more or less rounded point (Spencer and Gillen 1968, p. 143). Lévy-Bruhl once pointed out that every totemic group has its own, and from the standpoint of logical thought, it would be very difficult to define exactly what churinga are or are not. The external souls of individuals, the vehicles of ancestral spirits, and possibly the bodies of these ancestors themselves; extracts of totemic essence; reservoirs of vitality—they are all of these in turn and simultaneously (Lévy-Bruhl 1966, p. 77). It is clear that Churinga is the most sacred relic for the Aranda people.

Churinga are regarded as the abodes of ancestor spirits, and their spiritual essence is evident in the animistic perspective. Each churinga is associated with the spirit of a certain ancestor. The Aranda people hold that their ancestors traversed the land during the creation period, and that their spirits were ultimately imbued into the churinga. Churinga's designs frequently illustrate totems; however, they are not realistic. Instead, abstract geometric forms such as concentric circles, undulating lines, and spirals are employed to elevate natural phenomena into emblems of cosmic order. In the rite, the elders anointed the Churinga's patterns to invoke the spiritual power of their ancestors, akin to the man-

ner in which shamans strike drums to engage with the supernatural realm. Consequently, through the material carrier of Churinga as a hub, they established a connection between the visible realm (human civilization) and the invisible realm (the ancestral spirit world), facilitating communication among "individuals, objects, and spirits." Whether it is the beast-face pattern on bronze ware or the Churinga with abstract geometric patterns, as totemic art, they can express the sacred things deeply engraved in the minds of primitive people as an external visible object, presenting the unpresentable.

3.3. Sublime: Presenting the Unpresentable

Totemic art served as the outward expression of this divine power. The totem picture is apparent, yet it signifies an elusive and enigmatic being (Zhu 2002, p. 5). This enigmatic force, which is imperceptible and intangible yet undeniably real, now possesses a tangible and apparent embodiment. Totemic art renders the unseen perceptible, aligning with Lyotard's notion of sublime aesthetics. Lyotard's sublime aesthetics, primarily shaped by Burke and Kant's sublime theories, represents an evolution and elaboration of their concepts, with Kant's theory exerting a significant effect on Lyotard. Kant posited that the encounter with something so vast that it defies reproduction elicits a sensation of the sublime. Kant distinguishes between two types of sublime emotions found in nature: "the mathematically and the dynamically sublime" (Kant 1987, p. 101). The former pertains to entities of immense scale, such as towering mountains and tumultuous oceans, whereas the latter denotes an overwhelming force, exemplified by thunderclouds with lightning and thunder, or eruptive volcanoes. When individuals encounter these vast and formidable occurrences, they struggle to comprehend them rationally, resulting in sensations of unease or even anguish. But primarily "because they raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence" (Kant 1987, p. 120). In short, the sublime is the distressing sensation of being unable to comprehend or depict concepts encountered through the imagination; nonetheless, the constraints of imagination provoke the elevation of reason, resulting in a feeling of pleasure. Consequently, it can be asserted that phenomena that elicit the sublime are those that elude rational representation. Lyotard received a significant "legacy" from Kant's idea of the sublime, articulating the sublime as "present that there is something that is not presentable." The sublime is not a pleasure; it is a pleasure of pain: we fail to present the absolute, and that is a displeasure, but we know that we have to present it, that the faculty of feeling or imagining is called on to bring about the sensible (the image). To present what reason can conceive, and even if it cannot manage to do this, and we suffer from this, a pure pleasure is felt from this tension (Lyotard 1991, pp. 125–26).

Primitive societies evidently perceived a distinct sanctity in assemblies and religious rituals, and thereby used diverse symbols and imagery to convey this sacredness. These images represent totemic art, which effectively conveys the primal people's yearning for and quest for the sacred, becoming the focus of their veneration. Totemic art accomplished the "presentation of the unpresentable" to manifest the sublime. From this viewpoint, the representation of totemic art aligns with the framework of sublime aesthetics as articulated by Lyotard. However, it is important to clarify that reinterpreting the totemic culture of the past through Lyotard's concept of sublime aesthetics does not imply a historical relationship, genesis, or continuation between the two. The form and attributes of beauty manifested in totemic art align with Lyotard's concept of the sublime in aesthetics. The distinction lies in the fact that the sublime beauty of totemic art predominantly conveys primitive societies' comprehension and veneration of the sacred.

4. The Humanistic Beauty of Totemic Art: The Awakening and Transcendence of Individual and Collective Consciousness

If the sublime beauty of totemic art primarily expresses reverence for the sacred, then what we need to explore next is the reflection of primitive humans in totemic art. As social practices continued to develop, primitive humans gradually recognized the importance of the individual and the collective, which was reflected in various totemism rituals, especially in the "humanistic beauty" expressed in totemic art. For primitive people, their aesthetic consciousness was generated precisely through life activities mediated by social practices, and therefore, it was necessarily humanistic. The aesthetic consciousness they expressed in the anthropomorphization of totems constituted the main content of the aesthetic concept of totemic societies (Zheng 1992, p. 136). The humanistic beauty evident in totemic art was primarily manifested in representations of "humans and gods in a unified form" or "humans and animals in a unified form." The "anthropomorphization" of totem images means the awakening of the self-consciousness of primitive people. They no longer blindly depend on the natural power of totems and finally begin to try to prove the essential power of their own lives with their own images (Zheng 1992, p. 157), which profoundly and vividly encapsulate the spiritual brilliance and sanctity emanating from primitive humans as they navigated their existence and established social connections. This beauty is not the polished or sophisticated beauty of contemporary times, but instead a straightforward, earnest, respectful, and vivid spiritual manifestation.

4.1. Three Expressions of Humanistic Beauty in Totemic Art

First of all, when a collective designates an animal, plant, or natural occurrence as its totem, this action signifies a robust declaration of self-identity. They acknowledge their identity as a distinct group separate from others (other totems). The act of designating the group with a totem symbol signifies a crucial milestone in the emergence of individual and communal self-awareness. Simultaneously, the totem represents the sacred bloodline that unites the group's members. Plekhanov stated, "Totemism is characterized by the belief in a blood relationship between a specific lineage of individuals and a particular species of animal" (Plekhanov 1962, p. 383). It surpasses biological lineage and establishes robust social affiliations. Totemic art, including totem badges worn on the body, totem symbols painted on the body or objects, and built totem poles, serves as a visual manifestation of this sense of belonging. Through these artistic symbols, tribal members consistently affirm their identity and status within the community, fostering a sense of confidence and worth regarding "who I am" and "where I belong." This sense of belonging, rooted in shared ideas, constitutes a fundamental social necessity in human nature.

Secondly, totemic images embody sacred regulations and taboos such as the prohibition of hunting or consuming totemic entities, which function as social norms and are perpetuated and communicated through totemic art. Consequently, totemism may be considered the "law" of primitive societies. At the same time, Classical totemism stems from a special relationship to Nature, conditioned by a hunting-and-collecting existence and a particular form of social organization (Worsley 1955, p. 860). Clan members must collectively adhere to the applicable taboo regulations. Totemism underpins the operation and evolution of clan society. Chinese scholar Yi Zhongtian asserted that totemism is fundamentally more social than religious or genealogical; in essence, totemism represents a form of social relations among individuals, expressed through the interaction between humanity and nature, which has been sanctified through religious or magical means (Yi 1992, p. 89). As Eleanor Harrison-Buck and David A. Freide point out in their study, To move shamanism and animism out of their long-standing "savage slot" in anthropology, we consider these comparative terms not as static religious structures, but as ongoing relations

with the environment that Indigenous peoples describe as distinct ways of knowing and acquiring knowledge about the world in which they live (Harrison-Buck and Freidel 2021, p. 394). Consequently, totemism possesses a degree of sociality, and the taboos and sanctions linked to the sacred effectively sustain the psychological stability of the clan tribe. Transgressing totemic taboos is perceived as a challenge to the essential order of the group. Consequently, totemic art serves as a visual reminder for members to adhere to norms and preserve group cohesion. It illustrates the endeavors of early humans to establish social order and seek group stability and continuity, marking the inception of organization and morality in human nature.

Finally, about spiritual expression for both individuals and societies. For individuals, totems function not just as symbols of the collective but may also act as personal guardian spirits. Adorning oneself with totem ornaments or inscribing totem patterns on the body is perceived as a means to harness the protective power of the totem deity and establish communication with ancestors or guardian spirits. In group rituals like initiation rites, individuals symbolically experience "death and rebirth" by donning certain totem masks or acquiring the imprint of totem symbols (Frazer 1913, p. 272). Yi Zhongtian posits that in specific significant ritual practices, primitive humans adorning themselves in animal likenesses constitutes a socially meaningful act imbued with sacred significance, serving as a crucial means of self-affirmation for early humans as they transitioned into human society (Yi 1992, p. 92). Spencer and Gillen examined Australian indigenous tribes and, upon studying the initiation ceremonies of primitive societies, stated, "With very few exceptions, all Australian aborigines must pass some kind of initiation before they can learn the secrets of the tribe" (Spencer and Gillen 1968, p. 212). Through these ceremonial acts, primitive individuals underwent a shift in their social identity and attained spiritual elevation. In the ceremonies, shamans or priests donned totem masks and utilized totem objects, perceived as a method for converting into the totem or acquiring the capacity to connect with the totem deity. Totemic art serves as a significant channel for individuals to pursue spiritual power, transcend the mundane, and attain spiritual growth within a primitive framework. Primitive individuals engaged in creative production and ceremonial acts to comprehend and manipulate elements beyond their dominion (nature, life, and death), articulating humanity's deep spiritual yearning to grasp the sacred and attain harmony with the supernatural.

The aforementioned are the three main aspects of humanistic beauty in totemic art, mostly manifested in the anthropomorphism of creative forms: during the carving and painting of totemic pictures, primitive individuals would instinctively infuse human traits or feelings. For instance, while illustrating animal totems, they may assign anthropomorphic stances or integrate symbols that signify human existence, procreation, and vigor into abstract designs. This artistic expression represents a fundamental inquiry by prehistoric societies to comprehend their own traits and establish an equitable or even unique connection with all elements of nature. Then, we shall examine this in conjunction with particular archaeological findings.

4.2. Human-Faced Fish Pattern Painted Pottery Basin

The Chinese human-faced fish pattern painted pottery basin (Figure 3) is a pottery artifact from the early Neolithic period of the Yangshao culture. It was primarily used as a coffin lid for children's jar coffins, serving as a specialized burial vessel. The painted pottery basin is red in color, with intermittent black painted bands along the rim. The inner walls feature two symmetrical human-faced fish patterns painted in black. The human faces are circular, with pointed protrusions resembling hair buns on the tops of their heads and fish fin-shaped decorations. On either side of the mouth are stylized fish patterns, with

the fish heads overlapping the outer contours of the human mouth, as if the mouth were simultaneously holding two large fish. Additionally, there are two small fish on either side of the human face's ears, forming a unique human-fish hybrid. Between the two human faces, there are two large fish in a chasing posture. The entire composition is free-flowing and highly dynamic, with simple patterns and a fantastical atmosphere.[4]

Figure 3. Human-faced fish pattern painted pottery basin. Displayed in the National Museum of China, Beijing, China. Photo source: National Museum of China website.[5]

The human face is formed by the fusion of a human and a mermaid. The human head is adorned with peculiar attire, resembling the makeup worn during religious ceremonies, and bears the characteristics of a shaman. Therefore, such paintings are generally interpreted as symbolizing a shaman invoking the spirit of a fish deity to perform a soul-summoning ritual for children who died prematurely. This reflects the mourning and consolation of the ancestors for the early death of young children, attempting to use art to give death a sense of sacred destiny, reflecting the respect and care of the clan society for individual life, and reflecting humanistic beauty. Additionally, some interpret the coexistence of human faces and fish patterns as a mermaid-like fusion, suggesting that the fish has been fully deified and may be worshipped as a totem (Central Academy of Fine Arts 2002, p. 10). Thus, the fish is not merely food but a symbol bearing spiritual power. This abstract process represents a spiritual practice of elevating material objects into spiritual carriers.

4.3. Sorcerer Rock Paintings in the Trois Frères Caves in France

Western archaeological sites have revealed various representations of "human-divine hybrids" and "human–animal hybrids." Cave paintings were one of the main art forms of primitive humans and are important historical materials for exploring and researching history. In the late Paleolithic era, particularly within the Aurignacian and Magdalenian cultures, artistic artifacts began to exhibit "half-human, half-animal" figures or characters embellished with animalistic masks or other ornamental features. Such imagery is exemplified in the rock art of cave sites, including Marsoulas, Altamira, and Lourdes. The shift from the early Paleolithic period's focus on animal imagery to "human–animal hybrid" imagery distinctly demonstrates how early humans commenced the exploration and expression of their own humanity. This ongoing recognition and emergence of self-awareness has prompted efforts to articulate personal life experiences artistically, to highlight social engagements, and ultimately to discover the manifestation of the fundamental essence of human existence (Zheng 1992, p. 134). The most renowned instance of "human–animal syncretism" or "human-god syncretism" imagery from the Paleolithic era is the "sorcerer" rock painting located in the Trois Frères cave in France (Figure 4). In the early 1920s, Henri

Breuil produced a replica of this painting, illustrating an anthropomorphic being with human legs, bear paws, a horse's tail, deer antlers, a bison's beard, and owl eyes, poised in a dance-like stance. This painting is situated at the cave's apex, and this elevated placement creates the impression that the central figure in the artwork dominates the animals illustrated in the adjacent paintings. Consequently, many anthropologists have referred to this picture as a shaman or a god, with the ability to influence prey reproduction and hunting success (Bataille 1955, p. 120).

Figure 4. Sorcerer rock paintings in the Trois Frères caves in France. Photo source: after (Bataille 1955, p. 136), redrawn by author.

The human figures represented in this rock art can be understood as a synthesis of totemic symbols and humans, encapsulating the primitive humans' assertion of identity and the emergence and advancement of their self-awareness. Bataille observed, "Most surely, the Magdalenians (whom the Aurignacians must have resembled) sensed that, being animals no longer, having become men, they now possessed might, power, and a position of command" (Bataille 1955, p. 121). Furthermore, the amalgamation of totem and human, coupled with the anthropomorphism of the divine, imparted divine attributes of the totem to humanity. Humans were no longer wholly subordinate to nature; their status and self-awareness were markedly enhanced. This surreal image, merging human and animal traits, examines humanity and sacred power, resembling the bravery to advance toward an unknown light in darkness—it epitomizes the most ancient and enduring beauty of humanity.

The humanistic beauty inherent in totemic art is central to its vivid representation of the spiritual awakening and transcendence of primitive humans.

Awakening: Primitive humans defined themselves (as a group) through totems, becoming aware of their existence and uniqueness (self-awareness), as well as their dependence on and belonging to the group (sociality). They projected the characteristics of humanity onto all things in nature (totems) and sought to draw strength and wisdom from them.

Transcendence: Through primitive art and rituals, early humans sought to break through the limitations of individual life, connect with their ancestors and deities, and pursue a sacred order and meaning that transcended everyday experience. This pursuit of meaning, connection, and eternity is the most profound and spiritually enlightening part of human nature.

Therefore, the humanistic beauty in totemic art signifies the evolution of life and humanity as subjects of primitive spiritual reflection, indicating that primitive peoples were not entirely subservient to totems and natural forces. The representation of human images and the formulation of values have experienced significant advancement. This represents the external manifestation of the spiritual realm of primitive humans, imbued with reverence for the origin of life, accountability for the group's perpetuation, the quest for cosmic harmony, and the yearning for transcendent authority. This spiritual radiance emerging from ignorance and the continual manifestation of sanctity exemplify the resilience of the human spirit, as well as the most fundamental, genuine, and poignant humanistic beauty. It demonstrates that even in the most rudimentary conditions, humans have consistently engaged in inquiry and artistic expression regarding essential questions such as "who we are," "where we originate," "how we coexist," and "how we comprehend the world." This inquiry constitutes the essence of humanistic beauty.

5. The Artistic Beauty of Totemic Art: The Spiritual Essence Behind Totemic Artistic Style and Anti-Aesthetic Tendencies

Totemic art, as one of humanity's earliest symbolic systems, serves as both the cultural code of primitive social structures and a tangible manifestation of the spiritual realm of early societies. The essence of totemic art, as a visual embodiment of primitive beliefs, transcends mere formal aesthetics; it serves as a spiritual expression that intertwines spirituality and sacredness. Beneath the ostensibly rugged lines and intense forms reside the primitive peoples' deep comprehension of the genesis of life, cultural identity, and the very structure of the cosmos. This art form, through stylistic evolution, utilitarian characteristics, and symbolic imagery, alters the primitive people's comprehension of the universe, their veneration for life, and their communal unity into a tangible sacred beauty.

Totemic art was integral to the totemic practices of early human societies and emerged concurrently with totemism. From the religious standpoint of totemism, totemic art represents the divine embodiment of the primitive religious notion of totemism, wherein sacred power and veneration are unveiled and articulated. Artistic endeavors were essential components of totemic or witchcraft rituals. Artistic imagery fulfilled prehistoric humans' desire to invoke totemic spirits, simultaneously eliciting the psychological impacts of totemic or witchcraft rituals, thereby bolstering their confidence in practical endeavors (Zheng 1992, p. 46). From this viewpoint, totemic art originated from the beliefs and rituals of totemism, while simultaneously exerting a reciprocal influence on totemism, intensifying the primitive people's psychological and emotional veneration for the sacred, thereby objectively fostering and reinforcing the perpetuation and evolution of totemism. Furthermore, from the aforementioned humanistic beauty of totems, we have discerned that over time and through social practices, primitive societies developed a heightened awareness of the significance of both the individual and the collective, elevating humans to a status comparable to that of totems and deities. The alteration in the notion of humanity was assimilated by primitive individuals, with its external manifestation most intuitively reflected in the totemic art produced by these societies. Totemic art is an integral component of primitive social existence and a vital aspect of social life. Consequently, depictions of humans, humans alongside animals, and humans in conjunction with deities began to emerge on the rudimentary "canvases" of primitive peoples. The social essence of totems facilitated the evolution and metamorphosis of totemic artistic expressions. The impetus for the emergence and evolution of totemic art lies within the religious and social implications of totemism.

5.1. Style Evolution: From Concrete Imitation to the Spiritual Ascension of Abstract Symbols

Having comprehended the connection between totemic art and totemism, we shall now delve deeper into the issue of style in totemic art. Boas posited that in primitive art, "The patterns, or as we usually say, the style, dominates the formal as well as the representative art" (Boas 1922, p. 84). Denis Dutton has also emphasized the importance of style in primitive art (Dutton 1995, p. 322). Visual art predominantly employs formal aesthetics to convey and affect individuals, while expressive art chiefly depends on content to exert its impact. The essence of expressive art resides in the integration of form and content, a feat unattainable by mere formal beauty. Boas posits that the essence of style is rooted in the expression or reproduction of content. Boas categorizes this expression, or style, into two classifications: realism and symbolism. In art, these are expressed through realistic imagery and simplified patterns. Totemic art, as a significant component of primitive art, can be examined regarding its stylistic attributes from both realistic and symbolic viewpoints. Totemic culture predominantly existed during the Paleolithic era. Paleolithic art typically denotes the plastic arts discovered in Europe from 40,000 to 10,000 BC, primarily manifested as sculptures and rock paintings (Zhu 1988, p. 229). Consequently, painting and sculpture are significant and compelling subjects for the analysis of totemic art. Some scholars still insist that Paleolithic art was aesthetic and believe that the animal images and occasional human images found later in prehistoric caves in France and Spain were essentially aesthetic, and that humans have an innate nature to express themselves through art (Zhu 1988, p. 301). The most emblematic example of Paleolithic art with totemic implications is the rock painting of the "Lascaux shaft scene" located in the Lascaux cave in France (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The rock painting "Lascaux shaft scene" from the Lascaux Cave in France. Photo source: after (Bataille 1955, p. 111), redrawn by author.

In the entire cave, this is the only depiction of a human figure. A bison charges at a fallen bird-headed humanoid "weird man" in the image. The bison lowers its head and tries its best to gaze at the "bird man" in front of it despite the spear piercing its body and the large flow of intestines and other internal organs from its abdomen (Ochoa 2018, p. 817). Nonetheless, the bull bows its head and exerts all its strength, fixating intently on the "bird-man" before it. The representation of the wild bull is exceptionally precise and vivid. The thick fur, wide eyes, and upright horns are depicted with such realism that they accurately convey the bull's physique and the rage it experiences after being injured. This

representation stands independently, even when juxtaposed with contemporary realist art. Conversely, the "bird-man" figure has been deliberately stylized or reduced, resembling a bird-headed human or an individual adorned with a bird mask, featuring four fingers on each hand, the body inclined at a 45-degree angle, with fragmented bird-shaped weaponry (potentially spears or javelins) positioned nearby. The "bird-man" depiction is believed to represent a hunter camouflaged as an animal, or potentially a shaman engaging in sorcery. This prehistoric rock painting may no longer be fully comprehended, yet it illustrates the primitive people's totemism and their fervent, unwavering belief in nature. This rock painting exemplifies the realistic style identified by Boas.

A further exemplar of totemic art that exemplifies this style to its utmost is the Churinga (Figure 2). The Churinga is a sacred object, distinguishable from ordinary wooden and stone items primarily by the totemic symbols and engravings it bears. The Churinga of the Australian Aborigines consist of oval stone fragments and wooden blocks of varying dimensions, adorned with distinctive patterns featuring concentric circles or semicircles, spirals, parallel lines, and dots. These patterns typically possess sacred mythological significance, representing totemic ancestors and specific episodes of their narratives (Zheng 1992, p. 47). Therefore, the symbolic meaning of the decorative patterns on Churinga is evident. The diverse patterns adorning Churinga evoke numerous symbols found in contemporary abstract art. Philosopher Susanne K. Langer posits that art embodies emotions—encompassing the entirety of human feelings—allowing for appreciation, and serves as a transformation of these emotions into visible or auditory manifestations. Use symbols to transform emotions into something that appeals to people's perceptions, rather than something that appeals to reasoning skills or symptoms (Langer 2006, p. 28). The totemic art form on Churinga resembles this. In contrast to the realistic depiction of totems or deities through animal imagery, it converts the sacred essence and emotions associated with totems into observable symbols, thereby enabling primitive individuals to nurture their faith in and veneration for totems. The patterns and symbols on the Churinga also signify the evolution and diversity of the totemic art style. While this symbolic totemic art, in the Boas sense, continues to convey the sanctity of totems and support the faith, it has increasingly transitioned towards formalization and ornamentation. Therefore, from this angle, it is no accident that the Churinga, with its unique patterns and integration of formal aesthetics and sacredness, is the most genuine and representative example of totemic art (Errington 1994, p. 216).

China's archaeological remains also exhibit this stylistic evolution. The fish-and-bird-patterned painted pottery jar from the Yangshao Culture of the Neolithic period (Figure 6) is one of the representative examples of this realistic style. The jar is an orange-yellow color. The fish-and-bird patterns are painted on the middle section of the jar, with the heads and tails of the fish and birds intertwined, encircling it once. A water bird stands on the right side, with a long neck and beak, feathers on its head, striped feathers on its body, and wide-open eyes. Its beak holds the tail of a large fish in front of it. The fish is thick and long, covered in large scales, with prominent fin-like structures on either side of its head. It is struggling fiercely, with its head and body arched upward and curved into an arc, appearing helpless and defenseless (See Note 4). The pottery jar's pattern, composed of minimal strokes and primarily simple lines, is remarkably expressive, vividly illustrating the intense conflict between the fish and the bird, and can be regarded as a masterpiece of artistic creation. This image of a waterbird with a fish possesses both substantial artistic allure and deep totemic significance. The scene is widely regarded as a subtle reflection of the conflicts and struggles between the Bird Clan and the Fish Clan that coexisted in ancient society.

Figure 6. Fish-and-bird-patterned painted pottery jar. Displayed in the National Museum of China, Beijing, China. Photo source: National Museum of China website.[6]

The swirl-patterned pointed-bottom painted pottery bottle from the Majiayao Culture[7] of the Neolithic Age (Figure 7) is decorated with black paint, with parallel stripes on the neck and square continuous swirl patterns on the shoulders and abdomen. The pointed-bottom design suggests that it may have been used for hanging water, reflecting the prehistoric people's combination of practicality and artistry in their artifacts. The most distinctive feature of the swirl-patterned, pointed-bottom jar is its flowing, swirl-patterned decoration, characterized by dense composition and intricate, ever-changing patterns (Central Academy of Fine Arts 2002, p. 10). This decorative pattern serves not only as ornamentation but also as an abstract representation of the ancient peoples' deep understanding of natural phenomena. The Majiayao people resided in the upper reaches of the Yellow River, observing the swirling eddies created by the swift river currents daily. This natural phenomenon evoked their admiration and reflection. Consequently, it may signify a manifestation of reverence towards the force of the Yellow River's currents. Confronted with the river's life-giving yet devastating power, the ancient populace inherently cultivated a sense of veneration. Upon encountering the whirlpools created by the river's currents, they experienced a profound sense of mystery and awe. From an evolutionary standpoint, swirl patterns have evolved from figurative representations to abstract forms. As shown in Figure 8, in contrast to the realistic fish and human face motifs of the early Yangshao culture, the swirl patterns of the Majiayao culture demonstrate a significant level of geometric abstraction. This process of abstraction signifies the advancement of human cognitive capabilities and embodies the growing intricacy of human thought. The ancient inhabitants of Majiayao conveyed their comprehension of the cosmic order and their desires for life's perpetuation through these abstract motifs. The rhythm and melody in the patterns signify their understanding of the universe and embody an effort to establish order amidst chaos.

The stylistic evolution of totemic art represents not only an aesthetic transformation but also a process of visualizing and symbolizing spiritual concepts, illustrating the transition from concrete perception to abstract symbolism in primitive thought, thereby reflecting the advancement of primitive spiritual understanding and the elevation of sacred expression. The early realistic style emerged from primitive thought associated with witchcraft laws, focusing on the accurate representation of totems to exert control over their spiritual power through morphological imitation. As totems fully separated from their biological prototypes, totemic art progressively distanced itself from realism, evolving into geometric patterns, where symbolic designs transformed into an encoded system

of cosmic order and spiritual principles, and abstraction achieved the elevation of sacredness.

Figure 7. Swirl-patterned pointed-bottom painted pottery bottle. Displayed in the Gansu Provincial Museum, Gansu, China. Photo source: Gansu Provincial Museum website.[8]

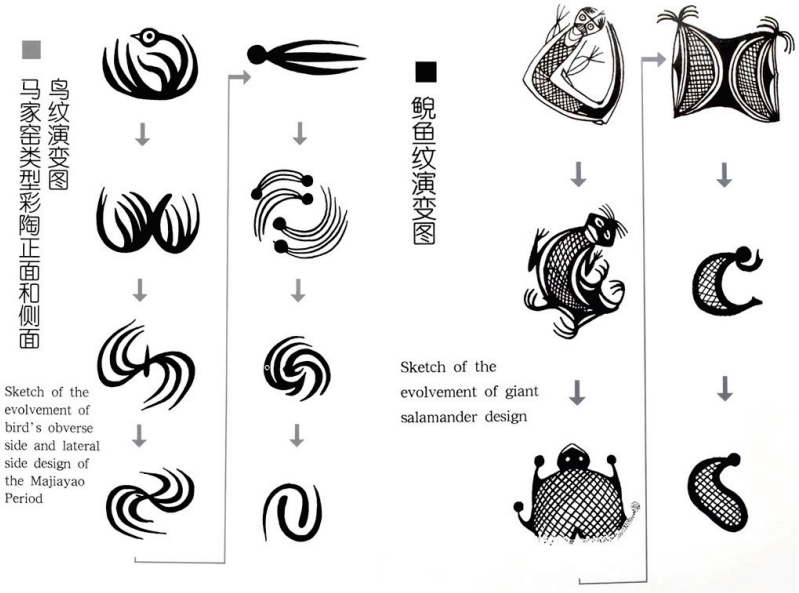

Figure 8. Majiayao culture animal pattern evolution diagram. Photo source: Gansu Provincial Museum, redrawn by author.

5.2. Utilitarianism and "Anti-Aesthetics": The Functional Construction of Sacred Systems

In terms of style, both figurative imitation and abstract symbolism in totemic art obscure a primitive inquiry into spirituality and sacred power. Furthermore, regarding aesthetics, they possess a defining characteristic that differentiates totemic art from modern art, "anti-aesthetics." The essence of totemic art lies not in sensory enjoyment but in its practical role in facilitating religious rituals, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring survival. This utilitarianism is unequivocally the foundation of its sanctity. The suppression of aesthetics by the utilitarianism of totemic art underscores the fundamental nature of art as a means of survival rather than an object of admiration.

It is important to clarify that "anti-aesthetics" in this context does not pertain to the anti-aesthetics associated with modern art, which critiques beauty through a lens of inquiry and defiance. It indicates that primitive totemic art is fundamentally incompatible with modern aesthetics, which focuses on the utilitarian aspects of totemic art. In contemporary aesthetic theories, beauty lacks any utilitarian function. Kant asserts that "The liking that determines a judgment of taste is devoid of all interest" (Kant 1987, p. 45). Totemic art originated from totemism and, as the manifestation of deities and totems, was venerated by all clan members. Totemic art significantly influenced the beliefs and daily existence of primitive societies, serving as an essential component of their lives. In "primitive" societies, the aesthetic motivation of artworks is secondary because artworks are constrained by utilitarian purposes, including information transmission, entertainment, the display of power and wealth, religious symbolism, and magic (Balfour 1893, pp. 31–64; Grosse 1996, p. 234). This combination renders totemic art and aesthetic consciousness a "by-product" of the religious belief in totemism. Currently, the system of life perception in totemic art remains undifferentiated, and the mechanisms of art or aesthetic perception have not attained independent status, nor have they managed to detach from the enigmatic aura of religious perception inherent in totemism (Zheng 1992, p. 58). Consequently, totemic art possesses a pronounced utilitarian and pragmatic essence, which contradicts contemporary aesthetic ideals. The distinct utilitarian purpose significantly shapes the expression of totemic art. To attain "unity" with the totem animal, one may employ decorative techniques including tooth extraction, skin incision, and tattooing. Totem poles were constructed as sacred objects to demonstrate veneration for the clan's totemic deities; individuals would also don animal disguises for hunting or witchcraft practices. These artistic endeavors frequently exhibit a peculiar, unsettling, and enigmatic quality, lacking the aesthetic sensibility of contemporary tradition (Zhang 2004, pp. 59–60). The "anti-aesthetic" traits of totemic art, specifically its indifference to formal beauty and strict adherence to practical functions, are a profound manifestation of primitive spiritual expression. This utilitarianism represents not a degradation of art but a fundamental metamorphosis of art into a conduit for conveying spiritual power, establishing a belief system wherein humans and deities coexist through ritualistic practices, social cohesion, and survival agreements.

The stylistic progression of totemic art, transitioning from figurative realism to abstract symbols, involves the distillation of spiritual concepts into symbols, while its anti-aesthetic traits underscore the fundamental role of art as a means of survival and belief. Primitive societies created a "spiritual universe" using totems: natural objects were imbued with divine significance, geometric lines represented the cosmos's order, and formidable shapes elicited a sense of sacred reverence. This beauty transcends the senses and pertains to the soul—it represents the profound exploration of life's origins and the universe's enigmas, whose reverberations persist in contemporary art. Renowned philosopher Zhang Shiying stated, "The sacred realm of 'oneness with all things' represents the ultimate concern of human existence, the highest value, and the source of beauty" (Zhang 2007, p. 245).

6. Conclusions

Totemic art is a remarkable manifestation of the spiritual cosmos of indigenous cultures. The three dimensions of sublime beauty, humanistic beauty, and artistic talent are interconnected and mutually reinforce one another, collectively forming a profound system of spiritual expression. Totemic art serves as the foundation of spirituality through its sublime beauty, while veneration of supernatural forces imparts sacred authority. This reverence for humanistic beauty fosters the awakening and transcendence of individual and collective consciousness, promoting kinship, the celebration of life, and commu-

nity connection, while grounding spirituality in vibrant life experiences and emotional needs. This artistic beauty transforms awe, warmth, sacredness, and vitality into a palpable spiritual existence through concrete perception, abstract symbolism, and utilitarian anti-aesthetic attributes.

The amalgamation of these three dimensions has rendered totemic art a medium for the spiritual expression of primitive cultures, a fundamental aesthetic practice for comprehending the chaotic world, engaging with the unseen divine, and guiding restless souls. Rather than representing mere superstition, it exemplifies an early human endeavor to utilize art as a medium for exploring existential meaning, divine authority, and the quest for a spiritual sanctuary. The reverence for natural forces (sublime beauty), the appreciation of interpersonal connections (humanistic beauty), and the aspiration for spiritual transcendence (artistic beauty) inherent in totemic art are timeless themes of human spiritual endeavor that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, continuing to resonate in modern art and spiritual inquiry. This ancient wisdom continues to inspire in the modern context. When technological rationality severs the interconnections among all entities, totemic art prompts a reconnection with the humility of animism, illustrating humanity's unwavering quest for spirituality and the sacred.

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Notes

1 In Chinese academics, "*tu teng chong bai* 圖騰崇拜" is translated in a variety of ways; the most common translations are "totemism," "totem system," "totem culture," "totem worship," The term "totemism" is the more widely used translation. See (He 1991, p. 16).

2 The exogamy system forbids both sexual relations and marriages between men and women in the same clan.

3 Different opinions are held by the ethnologists represented by Rivers and Frazer, who see totemism as a system of social organization, the Soviet anthropologists represented by Zolotarev, who see it as a form of religion, and the ethnologists represented by Rivers, who see totemism as a semi-social and semi-religious system. See (Khaytun 2004, pp. 2–4).

4 The source of the text is the website of the National Museum of China: http://www.chnmuseum.cn (accessed on 27 June 2025).

5 https://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/kgfjp/202008/t20200824_247218.shtml (accessed on 27 June 2025).

6 https://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/kgfjp/202107/t20210719_250709.shtml (accessed on 27 June 2025).

7 The Majiayao Culture is named after the village of Majiayao in Linxian County, Gansu Province, where it was first discovered in 1923. It is primarily distributed along the tributaries of the Yellow River, including the Tao River, Daxia River, and Huangshui River. The Majiayao Culture was first discovered by Swedish archaeologist Johan Gunnar Andersson in Majiayao Village, Linxian County, Gansu Province, in 1923. Based on modern scientific dating methods, the Majiayao Culture dates back approximately 5000 years and is generally considered to be a late Neolithic culture. A prominent feature of the Majiayao culture is the highly developed painted pottery found among its ceramics. Painted pottery is the most representative artifact of the Majiayao culture. The painted decorations are intricate and varied, and the painting techniques have reached a high level of maturity. In the Majiayao cultural sites, numerous pottery-making remains have been discovered. The painted pottery of the Majiayao type is predominantly orange, yellow, and black in color, with animal motifs such as birds, fish, and frogs painted on bowls, basins, bottles, and jars. Additionally, geometric patterns such as hanging curtains, swirls, water waves, grass leaves, and triangles

are also present. The pottery of the Majiayao culture features richly painted patterns and various engraved symbols. The interpretation of these patterns and symbols is also a hot topic in academic circles today. The content of these patterns may reflect the religious beliefs, spiritual emotions, and aspirations of ancient people toward real life in many ways. For example, do frog patterns reflect the ancient people's worship of fertility and concern for human reproduction? Natural motifs like landscapes may reflect the ancient people's understanding, reverence, and worship of the natural world; the depictions of groups of people dancing on pottery—were these ordinary recreational activities or ritualistic ceremonies to entertain the gods? In summary, the discovery of the Majiayao Culture is a landmark event in Chinese archaeological history, filling a significant gap in China's early history. See (Du 2003).

[8] http://www.gansumuseum.com/detailsPage?nav=0-0&id=1670 (accessed on 27 June 2025).

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Hearing the Distant Temple Bell Toll: A Discussion of Bell Imagery in Taixu's Poetry

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Abstract: This article explores the literary significance of the bell as an important image in the poetry of Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), a renowned modern Chinese Buddhist reformer and poet–monk. While the bell has long-held symbolic meaning in Buddhist ritual and Chinese literary traditions, its role in poetry has often been overlooked in favor of material culture studies. This article addresses that discrepancy by examining how Taixu inherited and reinterpreted classical bell imagery to articulate his personal emotions and religious philosophy. Following close analysis of more than sixty of his poems, it argues that Taixu used the bell not merely as a traditional image but also as a vehicle for expressing two core Buddhist concepts: mental purification and transcendence of the mundane. The article also highlights his creative pairing of the bell with other classical Chinese images—such as sunsets, moonlight, mountains, and forests—to form complex imagery groups. Taixu's skillful execution of this technique exemplifies the considerable literary talent and spiritual insight that enabled him to blend Buddhist doctrine with poetic expression to remarkable effect. Overall, his poetic corpus may be considered as both a continuation and a transformation of classical Chinese poetry traditions, affirming his identity as a modern poet–monk who possessed profound esthetic and philosophical vision.

Keywords: imagery; poetry; Taixu; bell; personal emotions

1. Introduction

Taixu, a prominent monk and influential Buddhist leader, played a crucial role in the development of Chinese Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century. He advocated for a Buddhist revolution and actively promoted Buddhist reform. He developed the concept of "Buddhism of the human realm" (renjian fojiao 人間佛教), encouraged the academic study of Buddhism, and played a key role in modernizing Buddhist thought in China.

However, despite extensive studies on Taixu's Buddhist movements,[1] his talent as a poet is often overlooked. His deep connection with traditional Chinese poetry can be traced back to his upbringing and education. Both his grandmother and his youngest uncle were accomplished poets, so Taixu received effective guidance in the genre throughout his formative years (TDQ: XXXI: 156–160).[2] Thereafter, he continued to hone his poetic skills through collaborations with mentors, associates, disciples, and students,[3] with his first poetry collection, *Meian Shilu* 昧盦詩錄 (The Poetry Collection of Meian; published 1916), serving as a testament to his burgeoning prowess (TDQ: XXXI: 197).[4] He had written more than a thousand poems by the time of his death in 1947, with the vast majority of these subsequently collated in the "Shicun 詩存" (Poetry Collection) chapter of the *Taixu Dashi Quanshu* 太虛大師全書 (*Collected Works of Master Taixu*), a comprehensive anthology edited primarily by Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005),[5] one of Taixu's most distinguished disciples. Many

of these works are characterized by the poet's deft use of a variety of images, including lamps, candles, wine, tea, and bells.

An essential instrument in both ancient and modern Chinese monasteries, the bell not only carries profound significance for Buddhists but also features prominently in classical Chinese literature, particularly poetry. Bells were used in music-making and as ceremonial objects in the Western Zhou 西周 (1046–771 BCE) period, then became important tools for keeping track of time during social activities following the establishment of the Eastern Han dynasty 東漢 (25–220).[6] Buddhist temples began to use bells for timekeeping from around the sixth century onwards (Zhu 2018),[7] and the bell first featured as a Buddhist image in literary works dating from the Tang唐 dynasty.

> 大鐘，叢林號令資始也。曉擊即破長夜，警睡眠；暮擊則覺昏衢，疏冥昧。
>
> The large bell, echoing through the monasteries, marks the beginning. Its morning toll shatters the long night, rousing sleepers; its evening toll dispels the dusk, dispersing obscurity.[8]

Li Bai 李白 (701–762)[9]—a renowned Tang poet who was deeply influenced by Buddhism[10]—was one of the first to employ this type of imagery, paving the way for subsequent writers:

> 樹深時見鹿，溪午不聞鐘。
> In the thick woods a deer is seen at times,
> Along the stream [I] hear no noonday bell.[11]

It is intriguing that this short couplet begins with a seemingly straightforward description of the poet's surroundings—woods, deer, stream—but then suddenly references an object that has no place in that environment: the noonday bell. This raises the question of why Li Bai chose to incorporate such an apparently incongruous image in the poem. It could be that the bell was such a popular Buddhist image at the time that he used it subconsciously.

Yet, despite the bell's prevalence in the works of Li Bai and countless other eminent classical poets, scholars have tended to focus on its role in Buddhism solely from a material culture perspective.[12] This article attempts to rectify this oversight by investigating bells from a literary perspective.

A host of modern Chinese poets—including the poet–monks Xuyun 虛雲 (1840–1959), Jing'an 敬安 (1852–1912)[13], Hongyi 弘一 (1880–1942), and Su Manshu 蘇曼殊 (1884–1918)[14]—inherited their classical predecessors' fascination with bells, often incorporating them into their poetry. Similarly, Taixu mentions bells in no fewer than sixty-five of his poems.

Such prolific use of bell imagery raises several questions that this article will attempt to answer:

- Why does the bell feature so prominently in Taixu's work?
- How can we connect the bell to his life experiences?
- Which Buddhist ideas does the bell represent?
- How does Taixu use the bell to convey his personal emotions?

Additionally, the article will explore the ways in which Taixu combined the bell with other traditional Chinese images in his poetry.

2. Origins of the Bell in Taixu's Poetry

Taixu's use of bell imagery in his poetic works can be traced to both his awakening and his study of—and attempts to emulate—classical Chinese poetry.

In Buddhist texts, monks' awakenings are usually associated with specific—often musical—sounds. For example, in the *Baizhang Huaihai chanshi yulu*百丈懷海禪師語錄

(*Recorded Sayings of Master Baizhang Huaihai*),[15] a monk's awakening is triggered by the sound of a drum:

> 有僧。聞鼓聲。舉起鋤頭。大笑歸去。師云。俊哉。此是觀音入理之門。後喚其僧問。你今日見甚道理。云某甲早晨未喫粥。聞鼓聲歸喫飯。師乃呵呵大笑。
>
> A monk hears the sound of a drum, and in response [he] raises a hoe and bursts into laughter before returning to his home. The master remarks, "What a fine sight! This is the gate through which Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara) enters the ultimate truth." Later, he summons the monk and asks, "What profound truth did you realize today?" [The monk] replies, "This morning, I hadn't eaten my porridge yet. When [I] heard the drum sound, [I] returned to have my meal." Upon hearing this, the master laughs heartily.[16]

In his account of this episode, Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 (719–814)[17] explicitly connects the monk's awakening to the sound of the instrument he hears. It is not mere coincidence that the two occur simultaneously.

Likewise, Taixu repeatedly linked his own awakening—which occurred during his seclusion on Putuo Mountain 普陀山 in 1914—to a tolling bell:

> 一夜，在聞前寺開大靜的一聲鐘下，忽然心斷…回復根身座舍的原狀，則心斷後已坐過一長夜，心再覺系再聞前寺之晨鐘矣。
>
> One night, Upon hearing the resounding toll of a bell in the temple in front [i.e., Puji Monastery 普濟寺], [my] mind was suddenly severed from the mundane world […] Returning to the original state of the physical body sitting in meditation, it was a long night had passed since the mind was severed, and the sound of the morning bell in [Puji Monastery] was perceived again.[18]
>
> 閉關二三個月後，有一次晚上靜坐，在心漸靜時，聞到前寺的打鐘聲，好像心念完全被打斷了，冥然罔覺，沒有知識，一直到第二天早鐘時，才生起覺心。
>
> After two or three months of seclusion, one evening during a period of calm meditation, I heard the striking of the bell from [Puji Monastery]. It was as if my thoughts were completely interrupted, and I lost consciousness, devoid of knowledge. This continued until the next morning, when the morning bell rang, and only then did my awakened consciousness arise.[19]
>
> 吾昔在普陀閉關，有一時忽覺妄想俱歇，身心若亡，聞寺中鐘聲，即自心不一不異，俱無方所，少頃念起，複現塵境，聞鐘聲仍自外來。
>
> During my seclusion on Putuo [Mountain], there was a moment when all delusions suddenly ceased, and my body and mind seemed to vanish. In this state, I heard the bell of [Puji Monastery], and my own mind was neither the same nor different, without any fixed location. After a while, thoughts arose again, and the worldly environment reappeared, with the sound of the bell still perceived as coming from outside.[20]

As these narratives demonstrate, Taixu accorded the bell a significant role in his awakening: the night bell "shattered" his mind, while the morning bell helped him regain consciousness. In light of this, it is scarcely surprising that bell imagery features so prominently in many of the poems he composed after this event.

Moreover, Taixu was a diligent student of classical poetry (TDQ: XXXI: 159–175), so he would have been familiar with his predecessors' incorporation of bell images in their work. For instance, in the *Quan Tang shi*全唐詩 (*Complete Collection of Tang Dynasty Poetry*),[21] the bell features in 1206 poems, including 42 by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846),[22] one of Taixu's favorite poets[23] (Fu 2007, pp. 192, 211). In the following example, Bai Juyi relates the silence and stillness of a desolate winter to the moment when an evening bell stops tolling:

庭草留霜池結冰，黃昏鐘絕凍雲凝。
Frost lingers on garden grass, ice forms on the pond,
The dusk bell ceases; frozen clouds congeal.[24]

It is safe to assume that Taixu came across this and dozens of similar poems in the course of his studies, and that they had a profound influence on his own work, given his frequent references to dusk bells, and his use of such imagery to express his emotions.

3. The Bell and Buddhism

In other poems, the bell symbolizes Taixu's adherence to his Buddhist beliefs. For example, he heard the tolling of the temple bell during a visit to Xiaoxuefeng Temple 小雪峰寺[25] (Yinshun 2011, p. 196) over the Chinese New Year in 1930:

林翠蔭含山外路，蕉香風送寺前鐘。
In the forest, green shade veils the mountain path,
Fragrant wind delivers the temple bell's sound.[26]

Here, Taixu uses the term *song* 送 (deliver) to describe the transmission of the bell's sound. This is an unconventional usage of the term, as *song* generally refers to the transfer of either a physical object or an idea, rather than a sound. Moreover, he himself usually followed the traditional usage: for example, he described the wind delivering coolness and the fragrance of lotus flowers.[27]

This raises the question of why Taixu deviated from tradition with regard to the bell. The answer seems to lie in his realization that it could be used to evoke two significant aspects of his religious life: purification and transcending the mundane.

3.1. Purification (Qingxin 清心)

Purification of the mind is a fundamental concept in Buddhism.[28] In *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元 (*Compendium of Five Lamps*),[29] Baizhang Huaihai provides a detailed explanation of what it entails:

靈光獨耀，迥脫根塵。體露真常，不拘文字。心性無染，本自圓成。但離妄緣，即如如佛。

Radiant with spiritual illumination, transcending the mundane world, revealing the essence of the eternal truth, unconstrained by mere words. The nature of mind remains untouched by impurities, inherently complete and whole. Liberated from delusive attachments, embodying the enlightened nature akin to that of a Buddha.[30]

Taixu expressed his pursuit of this ideal state in his poetry:

溪聲鳥語清心耳，林翠巒光遠市囂。
Stream sounds and birdsong purify mind and ear,
Green forests and mountain light distance the city's clamor.[31]

Here, the suggestion is that a pure mind may be achieved by returning to nature—somewhere far from the commotion of the secular world. Taixu revisited this idea in another poem, written in 1931:

數杵鐘聲聞遠寺，悠然策杖[32]過林坰。
Hearing the distant temple bell toll,
Leisurely, [I] walk with my staff through the outskirts of the forest.[33]

On this occasion, it is not only Taixu's immersion in the natural world but also the faint sound of the temple bell that purifies his mind. In other words, purification may be found in the monastic lifestyle as well as nature. This is a recurring theme in Taixu's poetry. For instance, he wrote the following verse on a trip to Japan in October 1917 (Yinshun 2011, pp. 58–59):

> 隔樹幽溪消世慮，聞鐘梵剎見僧儀。
> Beyond the trees, the secluded stream dispels worldly cares,
> Hearing the temple bell, [I] witness the monks' demeanor.[34]

Here, two important symbols of the monastery[35]—the bell and the monks' rituals—transport Taixu back to his familiar monastic life and thereby help him disregard his worldly concerns and purify his mind.

3.2. Transcending the Mundane (Chushi 出世*)*

Transcending the mundane is another key feature of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism:

> 用大，能生一切世間、出世間善因果故。
> [*Mahāyāna*'s] *great power is that it can* generate wholesome causes and effects in all worlds and beyond all worlds.[36]

Many ancient Chinese poets—both Buddhist and non-Buddhist—embraced this concept. For example, Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427),[37] a famous poet of the Eastern Jin 東晉 dynasty (317–420), felt that he transcended the mundane by abandoning his career as a government official and instead following a simple but fulfilling rustic life:[38]

> 晨興理荒穢，帶月荷鋤歸。
> [I] weed at dawn though early still,
> I plod home with my moonlit hoe.[39]

This is just one of countless poems in which Tao Qian conveys the satisfaction he experiences through the completion of routine daily tasks.

Taixu was deeply influenced by Tao Qian's work (TDQ: XXXI: 193),[40] as is evident in the following account of his own attempts to transcend the mundane:[41]

> 慕勝求真之為想，或不滿意於現前之生活而別慕高遠，或不信任於幻眾之境界而推求真實，如希生天，願生淨土，及修世出世之定慧等。
> Aspiring for the ideal and seeking truth often stem from dissatisfaction with one's current life and a longing for something higher and more distant, or from a mistrust of the illusory nature of the world and a quest for reality. This includes desires such as being reborn in heavenly realms, wishing for rebirth in a pure land, and cultivating worldly and transcendent states of concentration and wisdom.[42]

Therefore, according to Taixu, his pursuit of transcendence was motivated by dissatisfaction with the mundane world coupled with a yearning to experience a higher spiritual realm.[43]

In Buddhist texts, this goal is often evoked through bell imagery. For example, in *Fa yuan zhu lin* 法苑珠林 (*Pearl Forest of the Dharma Grove*),[44] a comprehensive Buddhist encyclopedia, bells symbolize liberation from suffering and the attainment of transcendence:

> 若打鍾時，願一切惡道諸苦並皆停止。
> When the bell is struck, may all the sufferings of the evil realms cease.[45]

Taixu takes this symbolism a step further in his poetry by using the bell to evoke two distinct aspects of transcendence. On the one hand, he identifies bells with the heavenly realms (*shangjie* 上界), and thereby implies that transcendence is an elusive state that most mortals—including himself—find hard to achieve. Consequently, he is filled with longing when he hears a bell tolling in the lower realms (*xiajie* 下界):[46]

> 最愛劍門回首望，雲間飛渡數聲鐘。
> I love most to turn back and gaze at Jianmen Pass,[47]
> Amid the clouds, a few bell sounds drift across.[48]

> 夕陽寒靄南天外，數杵鐘聲落上封。
> In the cold twilight mist beyond the southern sky,
> The sound of a tolling bell falls on Shangfeng Monastery.[49]

In the first of these poems, the sound of a bell "drifting across" (*feidu* 飛渡) the clouds symbolizes the difficulty of transcending the mundane. In the second, Taixu's yearning for transcendence intensifies when he hears the sound of a bell "falling" on the monastery.

On the other hand, Taixu sometimes suggests that transcendence is possible if one maintains one's true nature in the secular world:

> 鐘聲生滅裏，溪水自潺湲。
> Amid the bell's arising and ceasing,
> The stream flows gently on its own.[50]

> 付與鐘聲自生滅，滿階春草未須刪。
> Leave the tolling of the bell to arise and cease on its own,
> The spring grass covering the steps calls for no trimming.[51]

Here, the arising and ceasing of the bell symbolize the rise and fall of all things in the world. Taixu, like the flowing stream and the freely growing spring grass, maintains his true nature, thereby achieving transcendence.

At this point, it should be stressed that Taixu did not equate transcending the mundane with rejecting the mundane:

> 於入世之志，具出世之胸襟，必以佛法為歸宿，乃得安身立命。
> The goal must be to engage with the mundane world while possessing the mindset of transcending the mundane and perceiving Buddhism as the ultimate refuge, thereby achieving peace and fulfillment in life.[52]

Therefore, although he viewed transcendence as an important ideal and aspiration, Taixu clearly understood that even devout Buddhists had to function in the real world. This was why he urged his students not only to study the Buddhist teachings (as a route to achieving transcendence) but also to participate in social activities (*rushi* 入世).[53]

4. The Bell's Temporal Dimension

In Taixu's poetry, the bell frequently represents some of his deepest emotions, including both joy and sorrow, with each emotion conveyed through specific reference to the time of day when the bell is tolling: night, dusk, or morning.

4.1. The Night Bell (Yezhong 夜鐘)

The bell's ring is more distinct when it does not have to compete with the hustle and bustle of the daylight hours, so it is more likely to catch the attention of poets once night has fallen. Zhang Yue 張說 (667–731)[54] was the first to use this particular image in his poetry:

夜臥聞夜鐘，夜靜山更響。
Sleeping at night, [I] hear the night bell,
In the stillness of night, the mountains resound even more.[55]

Many centuries later, Taixu also used the bell to signify the peace and quiet of night-time:

寒山寺,[56] 鐘聲到客船。
At Hanshan Temple,
The sound of the bell reaches the guest boat.[57]

This short couplet provides clear evidence of the strong influence of Tang poetry on Taixu's work, as he borrowed these lines almost verbatim from the most famous poem about a night bell, *Fengqiao yebo* 楓橋夜泊 (*Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*), by Zhang Ji 張繼 (715–779):

姑蘇城外寒山寺，夜半鐘聲到客船。
Outside Suzhou City, at Hanshan Temple,
The sound of the midnight bell reaches the guest boat.[58]

In Taixu's poetry, the tolling of a bell at night typically symbolizes hope and his own salvation, as the following couplet demonstrates:

絕頂平原擴萬峰，宵寒月落一聞鐘。
On the summit, the plain stretches to ten thousand peaks,
In the cold night, as the moon sets, a bell is heard.[59]

After creating a strong sense of insecurity by placing himself in the midst of a vast, dark mountain range, Taixu hears a bell that will guide him back to the sanctuary of the temple. Without it, he would surely be lost.

4.2. The Dusk Bell (Muzhong 暮鐘*)*

Poets have often used the transition from day to night to evoke sorrow. For instance, Li Bai wrote:

暝色入高樓，有人樓上愁。
Dusk falls upon the tall tower,
Someone on the tower is filled with sorrow.[60]

Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (1910–1998)[61] offered one explanation of why this is such an effective technique:

蓋死別生離，傷逝懷遠，皆於黃昏時分，觸緒紛來。
The sorrow of parting in death, the pain of separation in life, and the longing for what is lost all arise at dusk, stirring a multitude of emotions.[62]

In Taixu's poetry, the tolling of a bell at dusk generally signifies the second of these, as in the following example:

君疑我已死，我意君應存。…訪君來千裏，白雲傳暮鐘。
You [Huimin] might think I am dead,
While I believe you should still be alive.
[…]
I traveled a thousand miles to visit you,
The dusk bell echoes through the white clouds.[63]

Taixu and his friend Huimin惠敏[64] had not seen each other for more than ten years (TDQ: XXXIV: 246), but they arranged to meet in 1923 to discuss the establishment of new Buddhist associations. However, after three days together, they had to go their separate ways once again due to their busy schedules (TDQ: XXXI: 243)—a reluctant parting marked by the ringing of the dusk bell.

The intense sorrow evoked by the dusk bell is even more evident in another of Taixu's poems:

> 鐘聞催別思，回首夕陽紅。
> The bell's sound hastens thoughts of parting,
> [I] turn back, seeing the sunset glow.[65]

Here, for Taixu, the bell signifies the necessity of an upcoming parting, "hastening" (*cui* 催) his sorrow.

4.3. The Morning Bell (Chenzhong 晨鐘*)*

Ancient poets used the morning bell simply to signify the start of the working day. For example, in the following poem by Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843),[66] it signals the moment when his official duties begin:

> 曉鐘催早朝，自是赴嘉招。
> The morning bell hastens the early court,
> Naturally, it is time for the imperial summons.[67]

Taixu's use of morning bell imagery is more complex, symbolizing not only the start of a new working day but also the worldly concerns that must be faced each morning:

> 送到寺鐘催早起，揭來吟伴擾遲眠。詩思偶逐秋聲壯，瘧勢曾因暑病添。
> The temple bell prompts an early rise,
> Here [I] come, disturbed in sleep, my thoughts awake.
> Poetic musings follow autumn's robust cries,
> My fevered state once worsened by summer's wake.[68]

Taixu composed this poem during his seclusion on Putuo Mountain, when he suffered sleep deprivation on account of writing long into the night, coupled with illness brought on by the summer heat. As a result, he feared rather than welcomed the tolling of the morning bell. Moreover, this apprehension persisted long after his years of seclusion, as is evident in a poem he wrote in 1935:

> 幾回起視深宵盡，忽已晨鐘報五更。
> Several times [I] rise to see the deep night end,
> Suddenly the morning bell announces the fifth watch.[69]

Taixu tosses and turns throughout the night, unable to sleep, then suddenly hears the morning bell that signals the start of a new day. At this moment, he is filled with trepidation—he would rather remain in bed than deal with the tasks that await him.

To reinforce this sense of dread, Taixu often combined morning bell imagery with descriptions of the bleaker side of nature:

> 一枕覺來風雨止，泉聲謖謖曉鐘淒。
> Awakening from a nap to find the wind and rain have ceased,
> The murmuring of the spring and the mournful morning bell.[70]

Here, the bell, wind, rain, and murmuring spring collectively evoke the poet's despondency.

Nevertheless, despite his personal aversion to the morning bell, Taixu would occasionally use it to convey a sense of optimism:

> 青年諸君就是破曉之陽光，昏夜之警鐘，將來之救世主。
>
> Young people are the dawn's sunlight, the alarm bell at night, and the future saviors of the world.[71]

Therefore, young people are to the future what the alarm bell is to the night: the ringing of the bell signifies the end of night and a new life force emerging from the darkness, just as young people embody the vitality of future society and are the main drivers of social change and development.

5. The Bell's Spatial Dimension

Taixu frequently used bell imagery to represent three distinct aspects of physical space: distance (*yuan* 遠), separation (*ge*隔), and sparsity (*shu* 疏).

5.1. Distance

In classical Chinese poetry, a tolling bell is often heard from a great distance. For example, in *Wenzhong* 聞鐘 (*Hearing the Bell*), the poet–monk Jiaoran 皎然 (730–799)[72] recalls:

> 古寺寒山上，遠鐘揚好風。
> An ancient temple atop the cold mountain,
> The distant bell resounds through the good wind.[73]

The historian Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光explains why Chinese poets so often associate physical distance with the sound of a ringing bell:

> 中國人聽鐘聲鈴聲一貫不願把自己與聲音置在一處，而一定要遠遠地隔開。近處的鐘聲聒耳仿佛瓦釜雷鳴，只能令人震驚煩躁，而遠處的鐘聲卻悠渺蒼茫，可以令人想入雲外。
>
> Chinese people have always preferred to hear the sound of bells and chimes from a distance, rather than close to them. The sound of a nearby bell is harsh and jarring, akin to the noise of clattering pots, causing only shock and irritation. By contrast, the sound of a bell heard from afar is ethereal and expansive, allowing one's thoughts to drift beyond the clouds. (Ge 1991).

Taixu frequently juxtaposed this sonorous, distant bell with evocative descriptions of natural phenomena:

> 鐘磬遙響空，松杉寒映扉。
> Bells and chimes echo distantly in the void,
> Cold pines and cedars reflect on the door.[74]

In other poems, the faint sound of the bell clearly represents the remoteness of the temple that houses it, and therefore Taixu's distance from his spiritual home:

> 新東街接兩茅蓬，俯覽微聞遠寺鐘。
> The new eastern street leads to two humble huts,
> Looking down, barely hearing the distant temple bell.[75]

> 鐘聲傳遠寺，塔影臥荒丘。
> The bell's sound echoes from the distant temple,
> The pagoda's shadow lies across the desolate hill.[76]

5.2. Separation

The modern poet and philosopher Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897–1986) offers the following thoughts on the subject of separation, a concept that features prominently in traditional Chinese culture:

> 美感的養成在於能空，對物象造成距離，使自己不沾不滯，物象得以孤立絕緣，自成境界。
>
> The cultivation of beauty lies in ethereal emptiness and void, keeping a distance from objective things and forming your realm. All these images of material can be isolated and create realms in and of themselves.[77]

In classical Chinese literature, a number of image groups, such as *ge lian kan yue* 隔簾看月 ("viewing the moon through parted curtains") and *ge shui kan hua* 隔水看花 ("observing flowers across water") (Fu 2007, p. 222), are frequently used to convey the state of separation. Other poets prefer the somewhat simpler image of the bell, as the following example by the prominent late Tang poet Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (812–866)[78] demonstrates:

> 龕燈落葉寺，山雪隔林鐘。
> Altar lamps, fallen leaves, the temple,
> Mountain snow, the bell separated by the trees.[79]

At first glance, the meaning of these lines seems straightforward: the poet hears the sound of a distant temple bell echoing through the trees. However, according to Fu Daobin 傅道彬, Wen Tingyun composed this poem while residing within the temple—that is, he was in close proximity to the bell when he heard it, not on the other side of a wood (Fu 2007, p. 222). In light of this, we can only assume that he conveyed a sense of separation from the bell simply for artistic effect.

Taixu's account of a similar experience seems much more natural and fluid in comparison:

> 鐘聲悠邈隔林通，寺在深蒼密翠中。
> The sound of a bell drifts far, reaching through the forest,
> The temple is in the deep greenery.[80]

In this instance, there is a palpable sense of Taixu enjoying the sensation of the sound waves reaching his ears after filtering through the forest, presumably because that was what actually happened.

5.3. Sparsity

In Chinese poetry, the term "sparse bell" (*shuzhong* 疏鐘) is often used to describe the faint tolling of a distant or muffled bell. For instance, Liu Shang 劉商 (727–805)[81] evokes the tranquility of the night as follows:

> 青眼[82]能留客，疏鐘逼夜歸。
> Green eyes can keep guests,
> Sparse bells urge the night to end.[83]

It is precisely because the night is so peaceful that the poet can hear the sparse bells.

Similarly, in one of Taixu's early poems, the tolling of a sparse bell conveys the stillness of an evening on Putuo Mountain:

> 遙指濃陰處，疏鐘古佛家。
> Pointing to a place deep in the dense shade,
> The sparse bell sounds from an ancient Buddhist abode.[84]

As night fell, it became increasingly difficult to identify the exact location of the temple. However, Taixu was able to point it out with confidence as soon as the bell started ringing, even though the sound was barely audible.

6. Bell Image Groups

Taixu combined the bell with other classical Chinese images to create several image groups. Those that feature most prominently in his poetry are discussed below.

6.1. The Bell at Sunset (Xiyang Wanzhong 夕陽晚鐘)

The sunset is a common feature of classical Chinese poetry, often used to express the poet's regret over the imminent disappearance of something beautiful, including the sun itself. For example, a famous poem by Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813–858)[85] includes the lament:

> 夕陽無限好，只是近黃昏。
> The sunset seems so sublime,
> Yet it nears its waning hours.[86]

Taixu inherited this tradition of using sunsets to express regret. As mentioned earlier, he generally incorporated dusk bells in his poetry to convey the sorrow of parting. However, the meaning changes when this image is juxtaposed with a sunset. For example, in Zhaobao shan wanghai 招寶山望海 (Gazing at the Sea from Mount Zhaobao),[87] a very early poem dating from 1911, the tone is undoubtedly regretful rather than sorrowful:

> 脈脈斜陽裏，微聞鐘磬敲。
> In the gentle slanting sunlight,
> The faint sound of bells and chimes can be heard.[88]

A strong sense of regret is similarly evident in *Gusu youzong* 姑蘇遊蹤 (*Wandering in Gusu*), written in 1929:

> 卻愛湖山秋色裏，鐘聲數杵送斜暉。
> In the autumnal scenery of lakes and mountains,
> A few strikes of the bell accompany the sunset.[89]

Here, Taixu watches helplessly as the beautiful lakes and mountains fade from view with the setting sun. The gradual nature of this process—and Taixu's deepening regret—is highlighted by the fact that the landscape's disappearance is "accompanied" (*song* 送) by the rhythmical tolling of the dusk bell.

6.2. The Bell and the Bright Moon (Mingyue Zhongsheng 明月鐘聲)

In classical Chinese poetry, the moon[90] not only illuminates poets' surroundings but also inspires them to write.[91] The distinguished poet–monk Qiji 齊己 (863–937)[92] explained the role it played in his creative process:

> 月華澄有象，詩思在無形。
> The moonlight is clear, revealing forms,
> Poetic thoughts arise from the formless.[93]

Of course, moonlight is not a constant. The moon's appearance varies depending on whether it is full, gibbous, half, or crescent, the time of night, whether it is cloudy or clear, and the specific location from which it is observed, inspiring a wide range of contrasting emotions, all of which have been expressed in poetic form. Additionally, when a bell rings in moonlight—be it bright or veiled—poets naturally connect the two images. For example, Li He 李贺 (790–816)[94] wrote:

古刹疏鐘度，遙嵐破月懸。
An ancient temple's sparse bell echoes,
A distant mist parts, revealing the suspended moon.[95]

This image group also features in Taixu's poetry:

琴彈無盡意，鐘擊普門經。[96] 後夜窺寒月，秋聲曲徑聽。
Plucking the zither, endless meanings arise,
The bell rings, reciting the *Pumen jing*.
Later in the night, [I] gaze at the cold moon,
Listening to the sounds of autumn along the winding path.[97]

Autumnal nights are often bleak, easily evoking a sense of melancholy. As Taixu strolled on such a night, the unexpected sounds of a bell and zither soothed the negative emotions brought on by the natural surroundings, and he paused to appreciate the bright moon hanging in the night sky.

In another poem, the ringing bell is a welcome accompaniment to the moonlight, rather than a precursor to it:

郤愛梵鐘聞遠寺，一灣新月照人行。
[I] am especially fond of hearing the bell from the distant temple,
As a crescent moon lights the path beneath my steps.[98]

Here, the moon and the bell are portrayed as two old friends of Taixu: the moon illuminates his path, while the bell whispers softly in his ear, providing emotional support. Hence his "fondness" (*ai* 愛) for them.

6.3. The Echoing Bell in Mountains (Shenshan Mingzhong 深山鳴鐘*)*

Mountains provide a vast space in which bells may reverberate, increasing their auditory impact. Therefore, these two images are often juxtaposed in classical poetry, as the following couplet by Cen Shen 岑参 (718–769)[99] demonstrates:

昨夜山北時，星星聞此鐘。
Last night, to the north of the mountain,
[I] heard this bell amid the stars.[100]

When using this image group, Taixu does not merely situate the tolling bell in a mountainous environment but also emphasizes the impact of the latter on the former:

五磊飛微雪，千峰蕩暮鐘。
Wulei Mountain scatters light snow,
A thousand mountains reverberate with the dusk bell.[101]

Here, the otherwise silent, snow-capped landscape amplifies the peals of the bell so they echo across the surrounding peaks.

In other poems, Taixu substitutes valleys for mountains to achieve a similar effect:

懸崖千丈[102]瀑，空穀一聲鐘。
A thousand-*zhang* waterfall cascades from the hanging cliff,
In the empty valley, a single bell tolls.[103]

In this case, the sound of water continually splashing off the rocks complements the rhythmical tolling of a bell in the valley, which suggests monastic activity. Hence, humanity and nature are living side by side in harmony.

6.4. The Bell in a Forest (Canglin Wenzhong 蒼林聞鐘*)*

As discussed earlier, Taixu's poetry frequently conveys physical separation by describing the way in which the sound of a bell travels through a forest before reaching his ears. For example:

撥翠披雲上，林端落午鐘。
Parting the emerald leaves and ascending through the clouds,
At the forest's edge, the noontime bell falls.[104]

In other poems, Taixu follows the example set by his classical predecessors[105] by using the verb "pass" (*du* 度) to indicate the transmission of a bell's peals through the trees, and therefore his separation from the source of the sound:

疏林度梵鐘，幽卉含妙香。
Passing through sparse forests, the Buddhist bell chimes,
Hidden flowers carry a subtle fragrance.[106]

雜零鐘碎梵，飛度長林。
Scattered and fragmented, the bell's chime
Passes through the long forest.[107]

7. Conclusions

The bell is a traditional Chinese image that features prominently in much of Taixu's poetry as he uses it to express both a range of personal emotions and his Buddhist beliefs, especially those connected to his awakening, which occurred during his seclusion on Putuo Mountain. Therefore, there is far more to his repeated use of bell imagery than mere personal preference or even a desire to emulate his classical predecessors.

In Taixu's poems, the bell often signifies one of two important Buddhist concepts: purification of the mind or transcendence of the mundane. He achieves the first of these simply by returning to the sanctuary of the monastery or by walking through nature, in both cases accompanied or guided by the sound of a tolling bell. By contrast, he highlights the difficulty of transcending the mundane by associating it with a bell ringing in the heavenly realms, yet also emphasizes that transcendence is possible if one maintains one's true nature in—and continues to engage with—the secular world.

Taixu's "remarkable talent and unique spirit" (*xiongcai qiqi* 雄才奇氣)[108] are also evident in his skillful use of bell imagery to express a host of different emotions. For example, the night bell symbolizes his hope and salvation, the dusk bell evokes the sorrow he feels when parting from a friend, and the morning bell conveys his worldly concerns. Similarly, hearing a distant bell, physical separation from a bell, and the faint ringing of a bell all have significant, and quite distinct, meanings in Taixu's poetry.

Finally, he combines the bell with other classical Chinese images to form four main image groups: the bell at sunset, through which he expresses regret; the bell under a bright moon, which symbolizes his inner peace; a bell echoing through the mountains, which hints at the coexistence of humanity and nature; and a bell's chimes traveling through a forest, which underscores the listener's separation from the source of the sound.

In conclusion, Taixu uses the bell as a means to express and clarify his life experiences, religious beliefs, and personal emotions. In so doing, he not only demonstrates considerable literary talent and profound devotion to Buddhism, but also affirms his identity as a poet–monk.

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Abbreviations

TDQ *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書 (*Collected Works of Master Taixu*). Compiled by Yinshun 印順. 35 vols. Beijing: China Religious Culture Publisher 宗教文化出版社, 2004.
T *Taishō* 大正藏. CBETA, 2025. R1 (28 April 2025).
X *Zoku zōkyō* 續藏經. CBETA, 2025. R1 (28 April 2025).

Notes

1 There are several important works dedicated to the study of Taixu's Buddhist reformments. Pittman (2001) is considered a significant work, delving into Taixu's efforts to make Chinese *Mahāyāna* Buddhism relevant to the modern world. Ritzinger (2017) focuses on Taixu's Buddhist radicalism. Jones (2021) regards Taixu as a transitional figure in the establishment of a "Pure Land in the Human Realm" (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土).

2 Taixu's grandmother, Zhou Lixiu 周理修, a knowledgeable practitioner of both Buddhism and Daoism, specialized in poetry (TDQ: XXXI: pp. 156–157). His youngest uncle, Zhang Zizang 張子綱, was a talented literatus who was similarly well versed in Chinese poetry (TDQ: XXXI: 159–160).

3 Taixu's personal poetry collection included approximately 500 works by mentors, associates, disciples, and students. A number of these works are dedicated to Taixu, and he collaborated on others. For additional information, see TDQ: XXXIV: 290–444.

4 *Meian Shilu* quickly garnered a wide readership, as is evident in the prefaces of the *Taixu Dashi Quanshu*, written by several of Taixu's fellow poets and friends (TDQ: XXXII: 510).

5 Yinshun was a renowned Buddhist philosopher who joined Taixu in the modern Buddhist revival movement in 1930. Throughout the rest of his life, he dedicated himself to promoting "Buddhism of the human realm" (*renjain fojiao* 人間佛教), which encompassed many of the concepts and principles advocated by Taixu. For a more in-depth study of Yinshun, see (Bingenheimer 2009).

6 Buddhism was introduced to China toward the end of the Western Han dynasty 西漢 (202–8 BCE), and the Buddhist bell became increasingly popular during the Eastern Han dynasty.

7 In the Shang 商 (1600–1046 BCE) and Western Zhou dynasties, bells were primarily used as musical instruments during sacrificial ceremonies or banquets. After the introduction of Buddhism to China, bells—valued for their deep and resonant sound—became an essential ritual implement in Buddhist temples.

8 *Baizhang qinggui zhengyi ji* 百丈清規證義記 (*Interpretation Record of Baizhang's Pure Rules*), X 63, no. 1244, p. 515b7–8. All translations of the cited texts in this paper are provided by the author.

9 Li Bai, one of the most famous poets of the Tang dynasty, was known as the "Poet Immortal" (*Shixian* 詩仙).

10 While Li Bai is commonly known as a Taoist, he was also influenced by Buddhism. See (Li 2021).

11 Li Bai, *Fang Dai Tianshan daoshi buyu* 訪戴天山道士不遇 (*Calling on a Taoist Recluse in Daitian Mountain without Meeting Him*), (Peng 2013, p. 1864).

12 For example, Salmon (2007) illustrates the relationship between Chinese bells and Southeast Asian economic and commercial networks; and Burdorf (2019) explores the history of Buddhist temple bells during the Song 宋dynasty (960–1276) from the perspective of material culture and sound.

13 Also known as Jichan 寄禪, Jing'an earned the moniker "Eight Fingers" after burning off two of his fingers as a votive offering to the Buddha at Ashoka Temple 阿育王寺 in Ningbo 寧波. See (Yinshun 2011, p. 17). Taixu describes him as a handsome monk with a resounding voice. See TDQ: XXXI: 167.

14 Su Manshu is the author of a well-known romantic verse: "Amidst a foreign land and the approaching dusk/Sparse bells toll as red leaves fall, evoking longing" 況是異鄉兼日暮，疏鐘紅葉墜相思. See Su Manshu, *Dong ju* 東居 (*Eastern Abode*), (Shao 2013, p. 130).

15 *Baizhang Huaihai chanshi yulu* records the life and enlightenment of Baizhang Huaihai and documents his lectures and discussions with his disciples.

16 *Baizhang Huaihai chanshi yulu*百丈懷海禪師語錄 (*Recorded Sayings of Master Baizhang Huaihai*), X 69, no. 1322, p. 7a2–5.

17 Baizhang Huaihai was a highly influential monk who founded a Chan monastery on Mount Baizhang 百丈山and developed a *qinggui* 清規 (set of pure rules) that was subsequently adopted by monasteries throughout China. For further information on his life and work, see (Poceski 2010). For further studies on *qinggui*, see (Yifa 2002; Foulk 2004).

18 Taixu, *Putuo shan de biguan* 普陀山的閉關 (*Seclusion on Putuo Mountain*), in *Taixu zizhuan* 太虛自傳 (*Taixu's Autobiography*), TDQ: XXXI: 199.

19 Taixu, *Taixu fashi yuji* 太虛法師語集 (*Collected Sayings of Master Taixu*), TDQ: XXX: 271.

20 Taixu, *Wo de zongjiao jingyan* 我的宗教經驗 (*My Religious Experience*), TDQ: XXII: 306.

21 The *Quan Tang Shi* anthology was completed in 1706. It includes 49,403 poems written by 2873 poets during the Tang dynasty.

22 The poems of Bai Juyi (also known by his courtesy name Letian 樂天) are renowned for their accessibility and clarity.

23 See Taixu, *Zhongguo foxue* 中國佛學 (*Chinese Buddhism*), TDQ: II: 168.

24 Bai Juyi, *Ye zhao Huishu* 夜招晦叔 (*Inviting Huishu at Night*), (Xie 2006, p. 2110).

25 Located in Nan'an 南安, Fujian Province 福建省,this temple, which is also known as Xuefeng Chongsheng Chan Monastery 雪峰崇聖禪寺, was founded by Yicun 義存 (822–908) in 894.

26 Taixu, *Yu Zhuanfeng Hongyi Zhifeng zhi Xiaoxuefeng* 與轉逢弘一芝峰之小雪峰 (*Journey with Zhuanfeng, Hongyi, and Zhifeng to Xiaoxuefeng*), TDQ: XXXIV: 146. Zhuanfeng 轉逢 (1879–1952), Hongyi, and Zhifeng 芝峰 (1901–1971) were all renowned poet–monks.

27 Taixu, *Zhen xianshi lun zong yi lun* 真現實論宗依論 (*A Discussion on the Basis of True Realism*), TDQ: XX: 195: "The wind delivers coolness, bringing comfort and peace to those it touches" 風送清涼，觸人安樂. Taixu, *Linghu gongyuan* 菱湖公園 (*Linghu Park*), TDQ: XXXIV: 103: "The wind from the lake pavilion delivers the fragrance of lotus blossoms" 湖樓風送藕花香.

28 For further research on purification, see (Sferra 1999; Ghose 2007).

29 The twenty-volume *Wudeng huiyuan* is a historical work of the Chan school, compiled by the Southern Song 南宋 monk Puji 普濟 (1179–1253) at Lingyin Temple 靈隱寺, Hangzhou.

30 *Wudeng huiyuan*, X 80, no. 1565, p. 71c17–19.

31 Taixu, *You Guan xian you Qingcheng Tianshi dong Shangqing gong Chuanzhu miao* 由灌縣遊青城天師洞上清宮川主廟 (*From Guan County to Explore Qingcheng Mountain: Visiting Tianshi Cave, Shangqing Palace, and Chuanzhu Temple*), TDQ: XXXIV: 193–194.

32 The staff is a common image in ancient Chinese poetry, symbolizing the poet's tranquility. As an example, the Tang poet Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843) used the verse "Leaning on my staff, [I] watch the clear snow/The stream's clouds, layer upon layer" 倚杖望晴雪，溪雲幾萬重 to convey the peace he felt in nature after a snowfall. See Jia Dao, *Xueqing wan wang* 雪晴晚望 (*Evening View on a Clear Snowy Day*), (Peng 2013, p. 6715).

33 Taixu, *Xuedou wei Shi Hou huashi ti shanshui* 雪竇為石侯畫師題山水 (*Writing Landscape Poetry at Xuedou Mountain for Shi Hou, the Painter*), TDQ: XXXIV: 162.

34 Taixu, *Deng Yuemei shan* 登月眉山 (*Ascending Yuemei Mountain*), TDQ: XXXIV: 76.

35 The monastery in question is Lingquan Monastery 靈泉寺, on Yuemei Mountain 月眉山.

36 *Dacheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論 (*The Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*), T 32, no. 1666, p. 575c27–28. *Dacheng qixin lun* is traditionally attributed to Aśvaghosa 馬鳴. It is one of the most influential texts in the development of the East Asian *Mahāyāna* tradition.

37 Tao Qian, also known as Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, exerted a profound influence on subsequent generations of poets through his depictions of idyllic life.

38 In *Guiqu laixi Ci* 歸去來兮辭 (*Ah, Homeward Bound I Go*), Tao Qian describes his experience of living in the countryside. See (Yuan 2011, pp. 317–28).

39 Tao Qian, *Gui yuan tian ju* 歸園田居 (*Return to Nature*), (Yuan 2011, pp. 59–60).

40 Taixu read a large number of Tao Qian's poems; he even brought a collection of Tao Qian's poetry with him when he went into seclusion on Putuo Mountain in 1914 (TDQ: XXXI: 193).

41 See *Focheng zongyao lun* 佛乘宗要論 (*An Exposition of the Fundamental Tenets of the Buddha-Vehicle*), TDQ: I: 95.

42 Taixu, *Fojiao xinlixue zhi yanjiu* 佛教心理學之研究 (*A Study of Buddhist Psychology*), TDQ: XXIII: 210.

43 For further information on Taixu's views on transcending the mundane, see (Jones 2020; Travagnin 2022).

44 Daoshi 道世 (?–683) completed his compilation of *Fa yuan zhu lin* in 668. It contains information on a wide range of Buddhist sutras and treatises.

45 *Fa yuan zhu lin*, T 53, no. 2122, p. 1017a1–2.

46 "The bell sounds in the heavenly realms, heard in the lower realms" 上界鐘聲下界聞. See Bai Juyi, *Ji Taoguang chanshi*寄韜光禪師 (*Sending to Venerable Taoguang*), (Xie 2006, p. 2908).

47 The Jianmen Pass 劍門關 is an ancient gateway in Guangyuan 廣元, Sichuan Province 四川省. In his poem *Shu dao nan* 蜀道難 (*Hard is the Way to Shu*), Li Bai characterizes this as a treacherous route, proclaiming: "Guarded by one, And forced by none" 一夫當關，萬夫莫開. See (Peng 2013, p. 1683).

48 Taixu, *Ti Jiefei heshang fushui shanju tu*題戒非和尚拂水山居圖 (*An Inscription on the Painting of the Monk Jie Fei's Mountain Retreat*), TDQ: XXXIV: 171.

49 Taixu, *Banshan ting zhi Shangfeng si* 半山亭至上封寺 (*From Banshan Pavilion to Shangfeng Monastery*), TDQ: XXXIV: 230.

50 Taixu, *Baiyun shan jiangjing* 白雲山講經 (*Lectures on Buddhist Scriptures at Baiyun Mountain*), TDQ: XXXIV: 17.

51 Taixu, *He Ouyang Xiaotao zengshi yuanyun*和歐陽小桃贈詩原韻 (*The Same Rhyme in Response to Ouyang Xiaotao's Gift Poem*), TDQ: XXXIV: 147.

52 Taixu, *Fofa yu Kongzi zhi dao*佛法與孔子之道 (*The Buddhist Teachings and the Way of Confucius*), TDQ: XXII: 344.
53 "Many believe that those who study Buddhism are transcendent people, but we must engage with the mundane world in order to save it" 蓋學佛者，多謂為出世之人，但吾人必須入世乃能救世. See *Fayang shehui hua de fofa* 發揚社會化的佛法 (*Promoting the Socialization of Buddhism*), TDQ: XXVI: 219.
54 Zhang Yue, who served as chancellor under Emperors Ruizong 睿宗 (662–716; r. 684–690) and Xuanzong 玄宗 (685–762; r. 712–756), was also a renowned literatus who specialized in poetry and essay-writing.
55 Zhang Yue, *Shanye wenzhong* 山夜聞鐘 (*Listening to the Bell in the Mountain Night*), (Peng 2013, p. 932).
56 Hanshan Temple was founded during the Six dynasties 六朝 (222–589) and is located in Suzhou 蘇州. It is named after the famous Tang poet–monk Hanshan 寒山 (700–780), who was once its abbot.
57 Taixu, *Wang sanmei* 王三昧 (*The King of Samādhis*), TDQ: XXXIV: 276.
58 Zhang Ji, *Fengqiao yebo*, (Peng 2013, p. 2712).
59 Taixu, *Oucheng* 偶成 (*Casually Composed*), TDQ: XXXIV: 251–252.
60 Li Bai, *Pusa man* 菩薩蠻 (*Buddhist Dancers*). See (Qian 2007, p. 174).
61 The influential author Qian Zhongshu was best known for his novel *Weicheng*圍城 (*Fortress Besieged*) and the scholarly work *Guan zhui bian*管錐編 (*Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters*). Rea (2015) provides further information about his life and work.
62 Qian Zhongshu, *Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (*Explanation of the Mao Shi*), (Qian 2007, p. 174).
63 Taixu, *Fang Huimin tongcan* 訪惠敏同參 (*Visiting Huimin, a Fellow Student*), TDQ: XXXIV: 246.
64 Huimin was a poet–monk who studied alongside Taixu at Tiantong Monastery 天童寺 and Jetavana Hermitage 祇恒精舍. Consequently, Taixu affectionately referred to him as a fellow student (*tongcan*同參). See (Yinshun 2011, p. 24).
65 Taixu, *Jiuhua zashi shishou* 九華雜詩十首 (*Ten Miscellaneous Poems on Jiuhua*), TDQ: XXXIV: 143.
66 Jia Dao is renowned for his refined use of words and phrases when describing what are often desolate and bleak scenes.
67 Jia Dao, *Song Huangfu shiyu* 送皇甫侍禦 (*Seeing off Imperial Attendant Huangfu*), (Peng 2013, p. 6726).
68 Taixu, *Buda Changuan manxing* 補怛禪關漫興 (*Rekindling Inspiration at Putuo Chan Monastery*), TDQ: XXXIV: 61.
69 Taixu, *Wuxi jiyou* 無錫紀遊 (*Chronicle of the Tour of Wuxi*), TDQ: XXXIV: 182–183.
70 Taixu, *Yihai sanyue xie Shen Zhongjun Huang Qingqu you Tiantai shan* 乙亥三月偕沈仲鈞黃清渠遊天臺山 (*Journey to Mount Tiantai in the Third Month of the Year Yi Hai, Accompanied by Shen Zhongjun and Huang Qingqu*), TDQ: XXXIV: 180–181.
71 Taixu, *Xiandai qingnian yu fojiao zhi guanxi* 現代青年與佛教之關係 (*The Relationship between Modern Youth and Buddhism*), TDQ: XXVI: 205.
72 Jiaoran failed the imperial examinations in his youth and later converted to Buddhism. His literary works are highly regarded and he is considered a "great vessel of Buddhism" (*shimen weiqi* 釋門偉器). See *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (*Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*), T 50, no. 2061, p. 891c27.
73 Jiaoran, *Wenzhong*, (Peng 2013, p. 9332).
74 Taixu, *Pingdiao Weiyang si siji wei zhong shuo ji* 憑弔溈仰寺寺基為眾說偈 (*Drawing Inspiration from Paying Respects at the Ruins of Yangyong Monastery to Craft Public Verses*), TDQ: XXXIV: 260–261.
75 Taixu, *Tianmu shan jiyou* 天目山紀遊 (*Chronicle of the Tour of Tianmu Mountain*), TDQ: XXXIV: 147–148.
76 Taixu, *Yushan Changshu xiancheng* 虞山常熟縣城 (*Mount Yu in the Town of Changshu*), TDQ: XXXIV: 172.
77 Zong Baihua, "On the Ethereal Emptiness, Substantiality of Literature, Art," (Zong 2023, p. 19).
78 An expert in musical rhythm, Wen Tingyun wrote poetry in an ornate and dense style. For further information on his life and works, see (Rouzer 1993).
79 Wen Tingyun, *Su Qinsheng shanzhai* 宿秦生山齋 (*Staying Overnight at Monk Qin's Mountain Studio*), (X. Liu 2016, p. 425).
80 Taixu, *Tong Xilin Liaogong Baoen Zigong fang Zhe shan Xinkai zhanglao* 同錫麟了公報恩自公訪赭山心愷長老 (*Visiting Venerable Xinkai of Zhe Mountain with Mr. Liao from Xilin Chan Monastery and Mr. Zi from Baoen Temple*), TDQ: XXXIV: 33. Zhe Mountain 赭山 is located in the heart of Wuhu 蕪湖, Anhui Province.
81 For further information on Liu Shang's life, see (Y. Liu 2010).
82 *Qingyan* 青眼 ("green eyes") refers to the tender shoots of willow trees.
83 Liu Shang, *Ti chanju feisi* 題禪居廢寺 (*Inscription on the Ruined Chan Monastery*), (Peng 2013, p. 3451).
84 Taixu, *Xu Yushan Qianbu sha wantiao shi qiyun* 續昱山千步沙晚眺詩七韻 (*Continuing the Evening Gaze at Qianbusha of Yushan: Seven Rhymes*), TDQ: XXXIV: 27. Qianbusha 千步沙 is the largest beach on Putuo Mountain.
85 Li Shangyin composed almost six hundred poems, most of which highlight his melancholy. For a study of his work, see (Zeng 2008).
86 Li Shangyin, *Deng Leyou yuan* 登樂遊原 (*Atop Mount Leyou*), (Tian 2015, p. 17).
87 Mount Zhaobao, near Ningbo 宁波, was a center of Tiantai 天臺 Buddhism.
88 Taixu, *Zhaobao shan wanghai*, TDQ: XXXIV: 28.
89 Taixu, *Gusu youzong*, TDQ: XXXIV: 142. Gusu 姑蘇 refers to Suzhou.

90 In Buddhist symbolism, the moon represents Buddha-nature, and moonlight symbolizes the purity and completeness of the inner Buddha-nature: "Just as the world sees the bright, full moon traveling through the sky— pure and unobstructed" 如世所見，皎月圓滿，行於虛空，清淨無礙. See *Fo shuo yue yu jing* 佛說月喻經 (*The Buddha Speaks Moon Metaphor Sutra*), T02, no. 121, p. 544b18.

91 As Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842) wrote: "Infinite new poems are composed under the moon" 無限新詩月下吟. See Liu Yuxi, *Xie Huainan Liao canmou qiuxi jianguo zhi zuo* 謝淮南廖參謀秋夕見過之作 (*In Response to Liao Canmou of Huainan on Viewing His Autumn Evening Composition*), (Tao and Tao 2003, pp. 546–7).

92 The author of more than eight hundred poems, Qiji specialized in the representation of landscapes but also promoted the incorporation of Chan beliefs into poetry. For studies of his life and Buddhist poetry, see (Xiao 1997; Zhang 2019).

93 Qiji, *Yezuo* 夜坐 (*Contemplation in the Night*), (Peng 2013, p. 9518).

94 Known as the "Poet Ghost" (*Shigui* 詩鬼), Li He's ornate and imaginative style sets him apart from all his contemporaries.

95 Li He, *Nanyuan shisan shou* 南園十三首 (*Thirteen Poems from the Southern Garden*), (Ye 2015, p. 77).

96 *Pumen jing* is the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* 法華經 (T 262), which tells the story of Guanyin 觀音saving sentient beings.

97 Taixu, *Zhang gong Jizhi yao Nantong Zilang Guanyin yuan jiangjing* 張公季直邀南通紫琅觀音院講經 (*Invitation by Zhang Jizhi to Deliver a Lecture at Zilang Guanyin Temple in Nantong*), TDQ: XXXIV: 98–99. Zhang Jizhi 張季直 (1853–1926), also known as Zhang Jian 張謇, was a prominent businessman and educator.

98 Taixu, *Wan cong Maojia yan qi'an zhi Jinxian si* 晚從毛家堰起岸至金仙寺 (*Evening Journey from Maojia yan to Jinxian Monastery*), TDQ: XXXIV: 46.

99 Many of Cen Shen's poems have borderland themes, reflecting the fact that he served as a government official in far-flung corners of the empire for many years.

100 Cen Shen, *Dongye su Xianyou si Nanliang tang cheng Qian daoren* 冬夜宿仙遊寺南涼堂呈謙道人 (*Presented to Taoist Qian of Nangliang Hall at Xianyou Temple on a Winter Night Visit*), (Peng 2013, pp. 2030–1).

101 Taixu, *Wulei xiao fa* 五磊曉發 (*Embarking at Dawn from Wulei Mountain*), TDQ: XXXIV: 175–176.

102 A *zhang* 丈 is an ancient Chinese unit of length measuring approximately 3.33 m.

103 Taixu, *Duxia Tiantong si* 度夏天童寺 (*Summer Retreat at Tiandong Monastery*), TDQ: XXXIV: 5.

104 Taixu, *Kunming zayong* 昆明雜詠 (*Assorted Verses on Kunming*), TDQ: XXXIV: 196.

105 For example, the poet–monk Guanxiu 貫休 (832–912) heard "Mountain streams flowing through moss-covered cliffs, The wind chimes passing through the snowy forest" 山溜穿苔壁，風鐘度雪林. See Guanxiu, *Hushang zuo* 湖上作 (*Composed on the Lake*), (Peng 2013, p. 9468).

106 Taixu, *Riben fa Taiwan Lingquan si jishi* 日本發臺灣寓靈泉寺即事 (*From Japan to Taiwan, Residing at Lingquan Monastery*), TDQ: XXXIV: 77–78.

107 Taixu, *Fenghuang tai shang yi chuixiao* 鳳凰臺上憶吹簫 (*Recalling the Flute Played on Phoenix Terrace*), TDQ: XXXIV: 275.

108 See Note 107.

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Article

Cultural Resilience from Sacred to Secular: Ritual Spatial Construction and Changes to the Tujia Hand-Waving Sacrifice in the Wuling Corridor, China

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Abstract: The "hand-waving sacrifice" is a large-scale sacrificial ceremony with more than 2000 years of history. It was passed down from ancient times by the Tujia ethnic group living in the Wuling Corridor of China, and it integrates religion, sacrifice, dance, drama, and other cultural forms. It primarily consists of two parts: ritual content (inviting gods, offering sacrifices to gods, dancing a hand-waving dance, etc.) and the architectural space that hosts the ritual (hand-waving hall), which together constitute Tujia's most sacred ritual space and the most representative art and culture symbol. Nonetheless, in existing studies, the hand-waving sacrifice ritual, hand-waving hall architectural space, and hand-waving dance art are often separated as independent research objects, and little attention is paid to the coupling mechanism of the mutual construction of space and ritual in the process of historical development. Moreover, with the acceleration of modernization, the current survival context of the hand-waving sacrifice has undergone drastic changes. On the one hand, the intangible cultural heritage protection policy and the wave of tourism development have pushed it into the public eye and the cultural consumption system. On the other hand, the changes in the social structure of traditional villages have led to the dissolution of the sacredness of ritual space. Therefore, using the interaction of "space-ritual" as a prompt, this research first uses GIS technology to visualize the spatial geographical distribution characteristics and diachronic evolution process of hand-waving halls in six historical periods and then specifically analyzes the sacred construction of hand-waving hall architecture for the hand-waving sacrifice ritual space throughout history, as well as the changing mechanism of the continuous secularization of the hand-waving sacrifice space in contemporary society. Overall, this study reveals a unique path for non-literate ethnic groups to achieve the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory through the collusion of material symbols and physical art practices, as well as the possibility of embedding the hand-waving sacrifice ritual into contemporary spatial practice through symbolic translation and functional extension in the context of social function inheritance and variation. Finally, this study has specific inspirational and reference value for exploring how the traditional culture and art of ethnic minorities can maintain resilience against the tide of modernization.

Keywords: ritual space; cultural resilience; hand-waving sacrifice; Tujia ethnic group; Wuling Corridor; historical GIS

1. Introduction

The Tujia ethnic group call themselves "pi tsi kha" and live in the Wuling Corridor area adjacent to Hubei, Hunan, Chongqing, and Guizhou in China. Since ancient times, they have been a minority with a spoken language but no written language. Their population is about 9.5877 million, ranking seventh among all ethnic minorities in China (https://www.stats.gov.cn; accessed on 15 January 2025).

The hand-waving sacrifice 摆手祭 is a large-scale sacrificial ceremony handed down from ancient times[1], integrating religion, sacrifice, dance, drama, and other cultural forms. It is also the Tujia ethnic group's most sacred traditional festival (Duan 2000, p. 8). The hand-waving sacrifice predominantly consists of two parts: one is the ceremony itself, including inviting gods, offering sacrifices to gods, and the hand-waving dance, and the other is the physical space that hosts the ceremony—the hand-waving hall 摆手堂. Its history can be traced back to the primitive community sacrifice and Wu Nuo culture of the Ba State period (11th to 3rd century BC), more than 2000 years ago. Hence, it is called the "living fossil" of the Tujia Epic (Zhao 2014). It was further developed in the Han and mid-Tang dynasties. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, it evolved into a cross-village joint sacrifice activity developed under the promotion of the Tusi system, becoming a core cultural practice to maintain ethnic identity and regulate social order (Zhao 2014). Nonetheless, with the acceleration of globalization and modernization, the current survival context of the hand-waving sacrifice has undergone drastic changes. On the one hand, the intangible cultural heritage protection policy and the wave of tourism development have pushed it into the public eye. Furthermore, the hand-waving dance has been included in the stage performance and cultural consumption system as "China's first batch of intangible cultural heritage" (Qiu et al. 2022). On the other hand, the disintegration of the social structure of traditional villages, the outflow of young people, and the fading of religious beliefs have led to the dissolution of the sacredness of ritual space. In this context, the ritual space of the hand-waving sacrifice presents a complex tension between "sacred retreat" and "secular prominence". Furthermore, its material form, functional attributes, and cultural significance face reconstruction. This transformation is not only about the modern adaptation of the traditional ritual space of the Tujia ethnic group but also reflects the universal fate of the cultural space of China's ethnic minorities in the context of globalization.

Ritual space predominantly refers to a specific space used to carry out ritual activities. Early studies of ritual space concentrated on its social cohesion function. With a foundation of classical functionalism, E. Durkheim revealed how ritual spaces reinforce social integration and collective identity by demarcating boundaries between the sacred and the secular (Durkheim 1915, pp. 28–40). This perspective was further developed by T. Parsons' structural functionalism into a systemic framework—his AGIL model posits that ritual spaces serve both as a repository of cultural value systems and as an integrative mechanism for resolving role conflicts (Parsons 1951, pp. 4–27). J. Alexander's neo-functionalism advanced this discourse by redefining rituals as "social performances," emphasizing how the dramatic enactment of spatial symbols reproduces social solidarity (Alexander 2004, pp. 4–12, 89–102). Corresponding to functionalist approaches is the critical power perspective. M. Foucault revealed that ritual spaces are the material carriers of disciplinary technologies, where spatial arrangements enforce bodily control (Foucault 1977, pp. 172–77). P. Bourdieu's field–habitus theory, from a micro-power lens, deciphered the production mechanisms of cultural capital within ritual spaces. He argued that the spatial grammar of church architecture is not merely a physical layout but a spatialized expression of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991, pp. 163–70). The transitional nature of ritual spaces finds anthropological grounding in V. Turner's liminality theory (Turner 1969, pp. 94–130), while M. Douglas's theory further elucidates that the sacredness of space reflects the spatial projec-

tion of societal classification systems, with liminal states embodying temporary suspensions of cultural order (Douglas 1966, pp. 35–41). H. Lefebvre incorporated the elements of human, places, objects, practical activities, and social relations into spatial analysis and established the theory of space production, which posits that "social space is a socially constructed product" (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 26–39), emphasizing a triadic dialectic among material space, mental space, and social practices (Soja 1996, pp. 50–53). However, the rise of virtual ritual spaces in the digital age disrupts this traditional tripartite structure. The dissolution of traditional placeness poses critical challenges, while the cultural resilience of local traditional cultures during contemporary adaptation has emerged as a focal scholarly concern (Verhoeff 2012, pp. 89–94; Sumiala 2021, pp. 45–48).

The hand-waving sacrifice ritual is an iconic cultural symbol of the Tujia ethnic group. Moreover, the ritual space constructed by the ritual is also a relatively independent field in Tujia society (Zhao 2014). Existing research concentrates more on the perspectives of religion, architecture, anthropology, and folklore, separating the hand-waving sacrifice ritual, hand-waving dance, and hand-waving hall architecture as relatively independent research objects. Some researchers emphasize the role of the hand-waving sacrifice ritual as a large-scale ritual in carrying the collective memory of the Tujia ethnic group (Wang and Bai 2022); some concentrate on the cultural significance and inheritance value of the hand-waving dance as one of the first instances of intangible cultural heritage in China (Qiu et al. 2022; Zhou 2021; Ma and Zheng 2004) and its driving role in the current tourism economy (He 2022); and others view the hand-waving hall as a static container for rituals, ignoring the constructive role of the space itself in the ritual process, the behavior of participants, body dance movements, and the production of meaning (Deng and Li 2013). As a result, few studies have focused on the interactive association and mutual coupling mechanism between rituals and space in diachronic development. In fact, the most significant difference between the hand-waving sacrifice and other sacrificial activities or folk dances is its reliance on a specific space (hand-waving hall). They are interdependent and indispensable.

As a consequence, this study takes the interaction of "space-ritual" as a clue to specifically analyze the transition of the Tujia people from a closed and conservative traditional society to a contemporary society characterized by the convergence of diverse cultures; the isomorphic relationship between the architectural space of the hand-waving hall and the process, path, and orientation of the hand-waving sacrifice, which contributes to the historical construction of sacredness; as well as the mechanisms underlying the ongoing secularization of the spatial domain of the hand-waving sacrifice in contemporary society. This study attempts to reveal how the Tujia ethnic group, a non-literate ethnic group, achieved the unique path of intergenerational transmission of cultural memory through material symbols (such as hand-waving halls and sacred trees) and physical practices (such as ritual paths and hand-waving dance movements), as well as the transformation process of the hand-waving sacrifice ritual from sacred space to secular space in the context of social function inheritance and variation, to explore the possibility of embedding sacredness into contemporary spatial practice through symbolic translation and functional extension.

2. Hand-Waving Sacrifice

2.1. Study Area

The Wuling Corridor, with the Wuling Mountains as its axis, covers Western Hunan, Western Hubei, Southeastern Chongqing, and Northeastern Guizhou (Figure 1), with a total area of about 115,400 square kilometers and a total population of about 23,120,000. The Wuling Corridor, as a fold zone where China's terrain transitions from the second to the third terrace, is an important geographical and cultural channel from the Jianghan Plain along the Wuling Mountains and the five water systems of Qingjiang, Wujiang, Yuanshui,

Youshui, and Lishui into Southwest China. It has been an essential link between the Central Plains and the Southwest since ancient times. It is also a "historical sedimentation zone" where Chinese ethnic minority cultures converge and the core area of the "Tusi cultural circle" in history (Shen 2022).

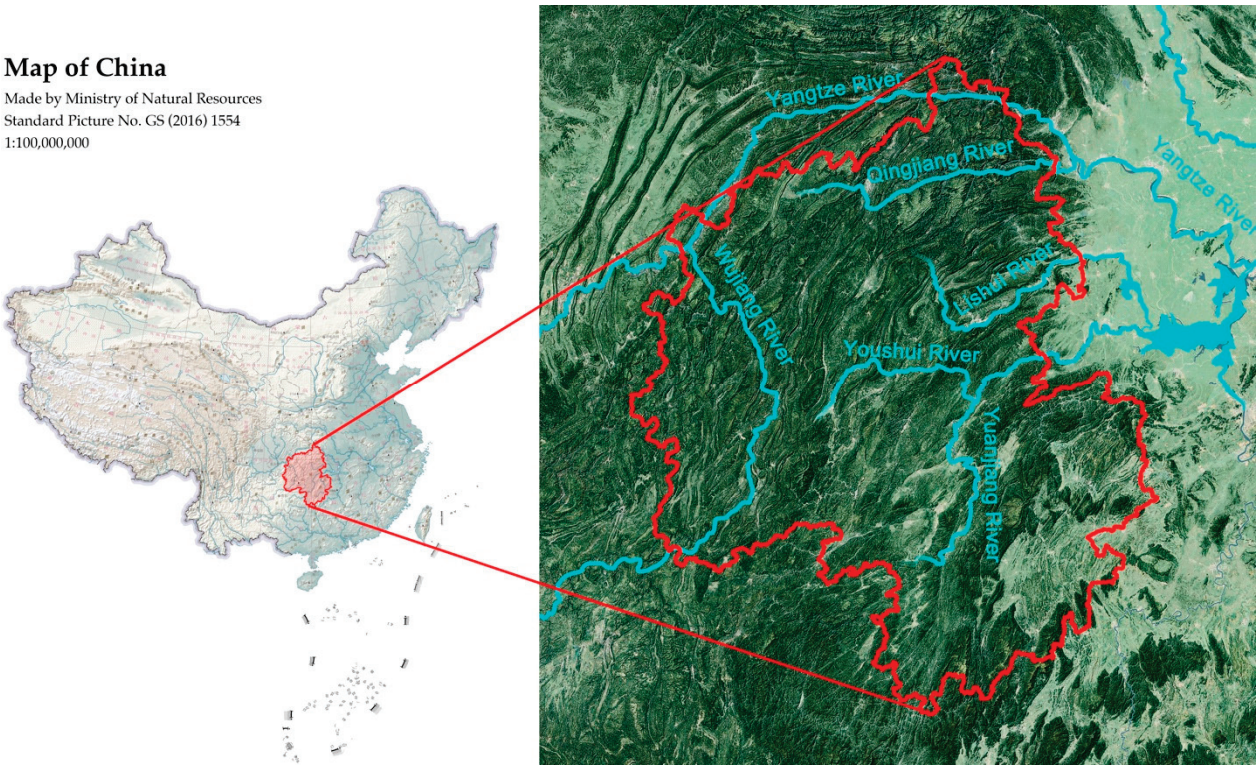

Figure 1. The study area.

The Wuling Corridor is a geographically closed but culturally diverse mountainous area with more than 30 ethnic minorities, including the Tujia ethnic group, Miao ethnic group, and Dong ethnic group. The Tujia, a traditional ethnic group, has the largest population, accounting for about 41% (Bai 2005). As the core settlement area of the Tujia ethnic group, this ethnic group historically formed a "large, scattered settlement and small settlement" living pattern here, nurturing a belief system and sacrificial tradition represented by the "hand-waving sacrifice". Simultaneously, the hand-waving sacrifice, as a joint sacrificial activity across villages, strengthened the regional cultural identity (Huang and Ge 2009).

2.2. Origin and Development

The origin of the hand-waving sacrifice is intertwined with the agricultural lifestyle and belief system of the Tujia ethnic group in the Wuling Corridor. Early Tujia ancestors predominantly used slash-and-burn farming, and their dependence on the natural environment gave rise to primitive sacrificial activities centered on "praying for a good harvest and warding off disasters". The prototype of the hand-waving sacrifice can be traced back to the "community sacrifice" of the Neolithic Age. Its core function was to pray for a good harvest and drive away epidemics through collective dance and sacrifice. The ritual space at this stage was mostly based on natural sacred areas (such as sacred trees and caves), and no fixed buildings had yet been formed. Participants were blood-related families. Furthermore, the objects of worship were primarily natural gods (tree, mountain, and grain gods), reflecting the distinct characteristics of animism (Huang 2011).

Throughout the Tang and Song dynasties, with the establishment of the "control system" 羁縻制度 by the central government in the Wuling Mountain area, the Tujia ethnic group gradually formed a stable settlement form, and the hand-waving sacrifice began to be combined with ancestor worship. During this period, the spatial carrier of the hand-waving sacrifice shifted from sacred natural areas to artificial structures, and the early "hand-waving hall" prototype appeared. Its form was mostly modeled after the community altar in the Central Plains, but it retained the localized sacred tree element—an ancient tree was set up at the center of the sacrifice. Furthermore, stones were piled under the tree to form an altar, creating a vertical symbolic system of "tree-altar-people" (Zhao 2014). The ritual time was also fixed in the first month of the lunar calendar, which was tightly correlated with the farming cycle: the "opening of the community" on the third day of the first month symbolized the start of spring plowing. More importantly, the "bidding farewell to the gods" on the fifteenth day of the first month marked the beginning of farming. Throughout this period, the hand-waving dance was closer to a primitive narrative language whose movements mostly simulated farming (sowing and harvesting) and hunting. More importantly, physical practice and production knowledge were passed down through intergenerational repetition.

The period of the Ming and Qing Dynasties—the period when Yongshun Xuanweisi 永顺宣慰司 (Tusi regime) governed the Wuling Corridor region (13th–18th centuries)—was a critical stage in the transformation of the hand-waving sacrifice from an agricultural ritual to an ethnic symbol (Huang 2022). In order to strengthen the legitimacy of its rule, the Tusi regime incorporated the hand-waving sacrifice into the "official sacrificial" system and linked it to Tusi king worship through myth reconstruction. For instance, the Yongshun Peng Tusi claimed that their ancestor, Duke Peng, was a descendant of the "Eight Tribes Kings" and added a statue of Duke Peng to the hand-waving hall shrine, turning the object of worship from a natural god to a personified ruling authority (Volume 4 of *Records of Yongshun Xuanweisi* 永顺宣慰司志 卷四). This political transformation prompted the hand-waving sacrifice to break through the scope of a single village and develop into a cross-regional joint sacrificial activity. In accordance with *Records of Chenzhou Prefecture* 辰州府志 in the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, "the Sheba (hand-waving hall) of each village held a joint sacrifice on time, beating drums and gongs, with thousands of dancers and crowds of spectators" 各寨舍巴（摆手堂）至期共祭，击鼓鸣锣，舞者千人，观者如堵, which demonstrates that its social integration function surpassed agricultural prayers and became a cultural tool for Tusi to "rule the subordinates and unite the people".

After the policy of bureaucratization of native officers 改土归流 was implemented throughout the reign of Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing Dynasty (1735), the political authority of the Tusi collapsed. However, the hand-waving ceremony survived because of cultural inertia, gradually shedding its political attributes and turning to expressing ethnic identity. The record in the local chronicles, that the "Tujia ethnic group danced the hand-waving, while the Han nationality was puzzled by it" 土人跳摆手，汉民观之不解 (Qianlong's *Yongshun Prefecture Chronicle* 永顺府志), highlights that it became a cultural boundary that distinguished the "Tujia ethnic group" from "the Han nationality". From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the field notes of Western missionaries (such as Chamberlain's *Survey of Tujia ethnic group in Western Hunan* 湘西土人调查) demonstrated that the recitation of the migration epic was added to the hand-waving ceremony. Furthermore, the dance movements were integrated into war simulations (such as "armor waving" 披甲摆 as well as "spear and dagger-axe waving" 矛戈摆), suggesting the reconstruction of the memory of ethnic historical trauma. Throughout this period, although the buildings of the hand-waving hall were damaged by war, their spatial symbols (such as the sacred

tree, bronze bells, and the tablets of the eight great kings) were still deliberately preserved, becoming a material anchor to maintain identity in turmoil.

Contemporary intangible cultural heritage activities (2008 to the present) further accelerated the symbolic transformation of the hand-waving sacrifice. With the inclusion of the Tujia hand-waving dance in the national intangible cultural heritage list, the regional ritual originally confined to the Wuling Mountain area was promoted to a component of the "pluralistic unity" cultural pattern of the Chinese nation. Thus, the local government reshaped the hand-waving sacrifice into a "Tujia cultural business card" by rebuilding the hand-waving hall and compiling standardized dance teaching materials. It is noteworthy that in this process, the original function of agricultural prayer has tended to fade: field surveys in Shuangfeng Village, Yongshun, illustrate that the younger generation of villagers mostly regard the hand-waving sacrifice as an "art passed down by their ancestors" rather than a sacred practice associated with their livelihoods (Interview Record, 2022). Nonetheless, the core symbols of the ritual space (such as the sacred tree and the circular dance path) are still retained, suggesting the adaptive adjustment of the ethnic symbol system to the impact of modernity.

2.3. Spatiotemporal Distribution

2.3.1. Data Source

Historically, hand-waving halls have undergone two large-scale demolitions[2]. Furthermore, the number of historical relics has been dramatically reduced. Most existing hand-waving halls have been rebuilt in the past 30 years (Figure 2). In accordance with the records of many historical documents and local chronicles such as *Yongshun Prefecture Records* 永顺府志 and *Xiangxi·Customs Records* 湘西·风俗志, "there is one small hall in a village" 一寨一堂 and "there is a small hall every five miles, and a large hall every ten miles" 五里一小堂，十里一大堂 (Yuan 2004). This reflects the bustling scene of numerous hand-waving halls, where each Tujia village in the Wuling Corridor area had at least one. Consequently, based on field surveys and literature records, this study attempts to roughly restore the spatial geographical distribution and historical evolution of hand-waving halls rooted in the geographical distribution of traditional Tujia villages in the Wuling Corridor area.

Figure 2. A hand-waving hall in Rebala Tujia Ethnic Village, Longshan County, Xiangxi Prefecture, Hunan Province.

Beginning in October 2020, this research team conducted in-depth investigations of 75 traditional Tujia villages and 43 hand-waving halls in Hubei Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hunan Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Chongqing Youyang Tujia and Miao Autonomous County, Guizhou Yanhe Tujia Autonomous County, etc.; made participatory observations with respect to 12 typical hand-waving halls (Shemihu Village in Laifeng County, Hubei, Shuangfeng Village in Yongshun County, Hunan, etc.), recording the ritual process, spatial transformation, and behavior of participants; and conducted in-depth interviews with 38 key informants (Tima, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, villagers, and tourism managers) to gain an in-depth understanding of the evolution of the architectural form of the hand-waving hall and the hand-waving sacrificial ceremony. Simultaneously, 648 Tujia traditional villages (hand-waving halls) in the Wuling Corridor area were collected through historical geographic information data retrieval, historical document retrieval, and local chronicle retrieval. The data sources include the China Local Gazetteers Database, Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China (https://www.mohurd.gov.cn, accessed on 12 January 2025), the China Historical GIS (http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis, accessed from 7 March 2022 to 15 January 2025), and the Chinese Historical Geography Digital Application Platform (https://timespace-china.fudan.edu.cn/FDCHGIS/homePage, accessed from 18 August 2022 to 15 January 2025).

All geoprocessing procedures in this study used the GCS_WGS_1984 coordinate system. All maps drawn during the study, as well as the administrative boundaries and national boundaries of the relevant areas, were rooted in the Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China (https://www.mnr.gov.cn/, accessed on 5 January 2025) provided by the National Geographic Information System. The basic geographic data on topography, landforms, water systems, transportation, etc., all stem from the National Geomatics Database (National Basic Geographic Information Database, 2018 version) and the National Natural Resources and Geospatial Basic Information Database (https://www.sgic.net.cn/portal/index.html#/Home, accessed on 5 January 2025).

2.3.2. Methods

(1) Spatial distribution index

This index includes name data, location data, and coordinate data. The location data include the administrative division information of the province (municipality), region (state), city (county), town, township, and village where the Tujia village (hand-waving hall) is located, such as Lianghekou Village, Shadaogou Town, Xuanen County, Enshi Prefecture, Hubei Province 湖北省恩施州宣恩县沙道沟镇两河口村. The coordinate data include the longitude, latitude, and altitude of all Tujia villages.

(2) Time period index

Based on the time when the hand-waving hall was formed, the historical background of its development and changes as recorded in local chronicles, and the distribution of information on the age of traditional Tujia villages (hand-waving halls), this study divides the development and evolution of hand-waving halls into six historical periods, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Six temporal stage indices.

	Temporal Scale	Description
Stage I:	Before 618 AD	Before the Tang Dynasty
Stage II:	618–960 AD	The Tang Dynasty, Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms
Stage III:	960–1279 AD	The Song Dynasty
Stage IV:	1279–1368 AD	The Yuan Dynasty
Stage V:	1368–1644 AD	The Ming Dynasty
Stage VI:	1644–1911 AD	The Qing Dynasty

(3) Dot density estimation (refer to Appendix A)

(4) Standard deviation ellipse analysis (refer to Appendix B)

2.3.3. Data Distribution Analysis

(1) Spatial distribution characteristics of traditional hand-waving halls

The hand-waving halls are predominantly distributed in 41 prefectures or cities under the jurisdiction of the four provincial administrative regions (including one municipality) in the Wuling Corridor. With respect to number, Table 2 shows that the top three are Longshan County and Yongshun County in the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province, as well as Youyang County in Chongqing City, accounting for about 20.1% of the total.

Table 2. Weighted statistics of the spatial distribution of the dot density of hand-waving halls (in terms of country).

Dot Density Ranking	Country, State/Prefecture-Level City, Province/Municipality	Dot Density	Number of Tujia Villages
1	Longshan, Xiangxi, Hunan	0.0194	48
2	Yongshun, Xiangxi, Hunan	0.0171	43
3	Youyang, Chongqing	0.0106	39
4	Yongding, Zhangjiajie, Hunan	0.0093	37
5	Shizhu, Chongqing	0.0078	32
6	Laifeng, Enshi, Hubei	0.0062	30
7	Xianfeng, Enshi, Hubei	0.0059	29
8	Yanhe, Tongren, Guizhou	0.0057	25
9	Lichuan, Enshi, Hubei	0.0050	24
10	Wufeng, Yichang, Hubei	0.0042	21

With regard to spatial distribution, Figure 3 illustrates that, historically, hand-waving halls are principally distributed in the central and northern areas of the Wuling Corridor, suggesting both a central tendency and a discrete dispersion. In line with the average of the variable series, the central tendency reflects the common nature of the distribution of hand-waving halls under certain spatial conditions—that is, the center of the data is predominantly concentrated in the Youshui River Basin, the Qingjiang River Basin, and the Wujiang River Basin. Figure 4 reveals that the most concentrated area is on both sides of the Youshui River. The birthplace of the river is linearly concentrated in Youyang County, Chongqing City, Longshan County, Yongshun County, and Yongding County, Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hunan Province; the Qingjiang River Basin is principally concentrated in Shizhu County, Chongqing City, Xianfeng County, and Lichuan County, Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hubei Province; and the Wujiang River Basin is principally concentrated in Yanhe County and Dejiang County, Tongren City, Guizhou Province. This concentration trend not only reflects the distribution pattern of the traditional hand-waving hall but also demonstrates that Tujia villages developed alongside rivers throughout history, and water systems became an essential factor

affecting the spatial distribution of the hand-waving hall and the spatial characteristics of cultural connections through water systems. Outside of the above-mentioned areas, the spatial distribution of hand-waving halls clearly suggests a relatively discrete trend, and the numerical amplitude is large, reflecting the overall spatial characteristics of small concentration and large dispersion in areas outside of the agglomeration area.

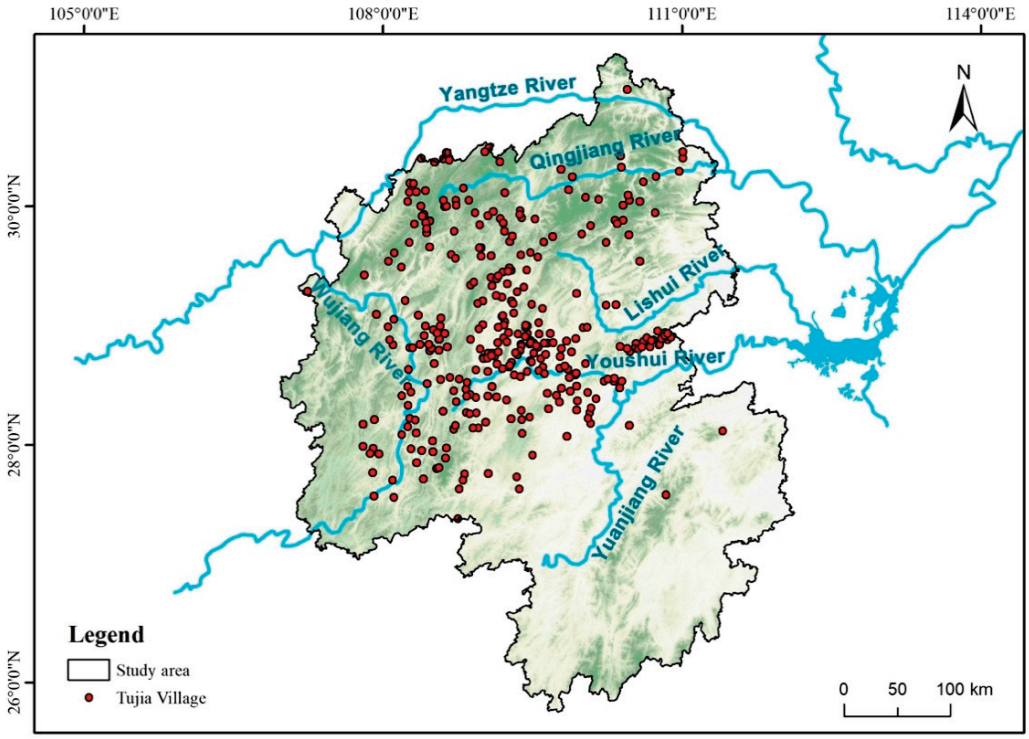

Figure 3. The spatial distribution of hand-waving halls.

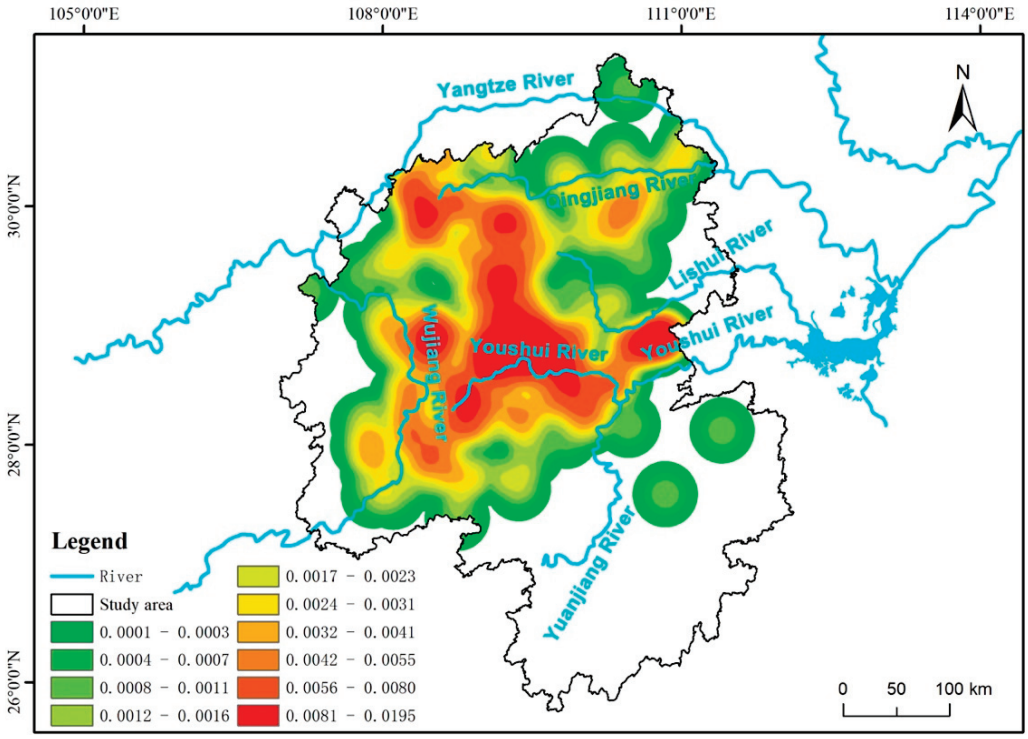

Figure 4. The density characteristics of the spatial distribution of hand-waving halls.

(2) Characteristics of the time evolution of traditional hand-waving halls

Table 3 shows that the number of hand-waving halls generally increased over time, from 54 in the Tang Dynasty (Stage II) to 648 in the early 20th century, with an average increase of about 8.22% in the six historical periods. The Ming Dynasty (Stage V) was the period with the highest number of hand-waving halls (276), and the Qing Dynasty (Stage VI) ranked second with regard to the amount of construction (267), but the construction density (0.96) was the highest.

Table 3. The weighted statistics of the number of hand-waving halls in six historical stages.

	Time Scale	Scale Length (Year)	Number of Hand-Waving Halls	Proportion	Construction Density
Stage I	Before 618 AD	—	16	2.1%	—
Stage II	618–960 AD	342	54	8.2%	0.16
Stage III	960–1279 AD	319	33	5.3%	0.1
Stage IV	1279–1368 AD	89	31	4.9%	0.35
Stage V	1368–1644 AD	276	258	39.9%	0.93
Stage VI	1644–1911 AD	267	256	39.6%	0.96

Figures 5 and 6 highlight the distribution changes and propagation directions of hand-waving halls in different historical stages:

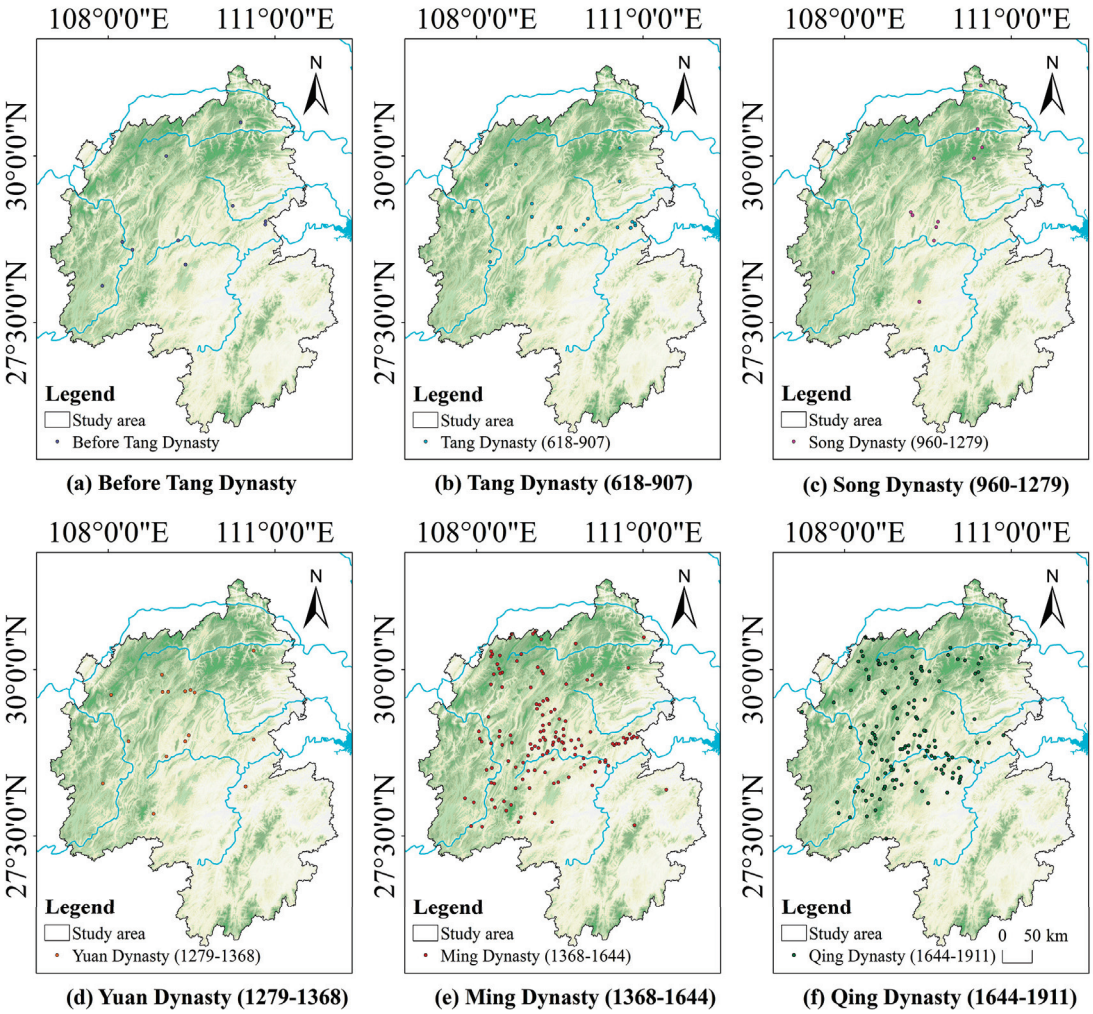

Figure 5. The density distribution of hand-waving halls in six historical periods.

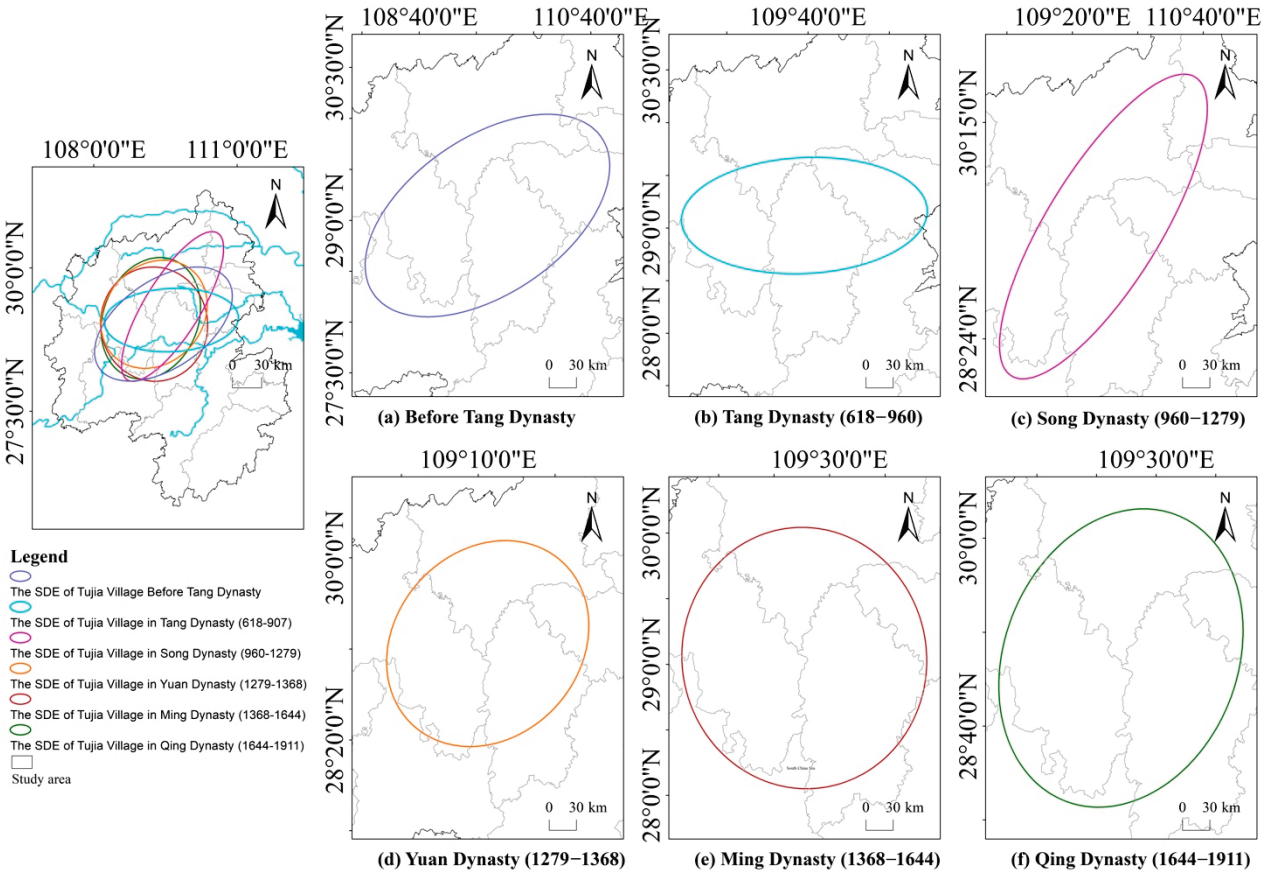

Figure 6. Standard deviation ellipse analysis of hand-waving halls in six historical periods.

In the Tang Dynasty, as the initial stage of the material space of hand-waving halls, the spatial distribution illustrated a distinct basin dependence, principally in the Lishui River and Youshui River valleys, with a linear distribution from east to west. This is highly consistent with the migration corridors of the "Southern Barbarian" 南蛮 tribes in the Wuling Mountain area at that time and the direction of the ancient salt and tea roads. The earliest batches of hand-waving halls were mostly located at the intersection of military garrisons and folk markets on the valley terraces. Moreover, they undertook the dual functions of ethnic group sacrifices and border governance.

In the Song Dynasty, with the emergence of the Tusi system and the development of mountain agriculture, the propagation axis of the hand-waving hall changed significantly, forming a diffusion trend along the southwest–northeast direction of the main ridge of the Wuling Mountains. The surge in the number of hand-waving halls in the Qingjiang River Basin particularly highlighted the shift of the regional political center. The power game between the Rongmei Tusi 容美土司 in Western Hubei and the Peng Tusi 彭氏土司 in Western Hunan prompted hand-waving hall penetration into the military frontier as a cultural landmark. Its distribution density was positively correlated with the Tusi garrison strongholds ($r = 0.63$).

While maintaining the traditional development pattern along the river, the Yuan Dynasty further strengthened the cultural communication function of the water network. The number of hand-waving halls in the five major river basins of Qingjiang, Wujiang, Yuanshui, Youshui, and Lishui accounted for 82% of the entire region. Among them, in the basin of the Mengdong River, a tributary of Youshui, there was a hand-waving hall every 5 km. This model of "expanding halls by water" not only benefited from the material cir-

culation introduced by the water transport system but also reflected the inherent logic of the Tujia cultural circle in spreading beliefs along waterways.

Throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the spatially explosive growth of hand-waving halls (accounting for about 79% of the total) was ushered in. Its distribution broke through the limitation of a single basin and formed a homogenized pattern with Longshan County and Yongshun County in the middle reaches of the Youshui River as the absolute core (accounting for 33% of the total). It radially diffused along the mountain folds and secondary water systems—infiltrating to Sinan Prefecture in Northeast Guizhou through the Wujiang River in the west, extending to the edge of Dongting Lake Plain along Lishui River in the northeast, and entering the hinterland of Xuefeng Mountain along the tributary of Yuanshui River in the southeast. Even in Lichuan and Enshi in the Qingjiang River Basin in Southwestern Hubei, the cultural integration of hand-waving halls (such as the double-phoenix Chaoyang variant combined with the stilt house form) was demonstrated. This "core-periphery" dissemination trend not only confirms the cultural integration introduced by the heyday of the Tusi system in the Ming and Qing Dynasties but also reflects the adaptive expansion of Tujia cultural space under the policy of military farming and Han–Tu division, culminating in the construction of a regional cultural community across contemporary administrative boundaries in the Wuling Corridor.

3. Sacredness: The Historical Construction of Hand-Waving Sacrifice Ritual Space

3.1. The Hand-Waving Hall as the Physical Space for the Hand-Waving Sacrifice Ritual

The hand-waving hall is usually located on high ground near the village or in areas with special geographical and cultural significance, such as near ancestral cemeteries, water sources, or ancient sacred trees. For instance, a hand-waving hall built on a hillside overlooks the entire village, highlighting the solemnity of the sacred space and symbolizing the protection and surveillance of the gods on the tribe. In contrast, a hand-waving hall built by a stream implies a source of life and the spirit of the gods. The orientation of the hand-waving hall is not like the traditional Chinese architecture that faces south, but it must occupy the best local Feng Shui environment. Usually, the main axis running through the entire architectural space must face a distant mountain.

As the material carrier of hand-waving sacrifice ritual, the hand-waving hall consists of three elements: the temple, the courtyard, and the sacred tree, which are arranged in a particular spatial order to form a ritual space. Judging from the many remaining buildings distributed in the Wuling Corridor area, especially in the Youshui River basin and the Qingjiang River basin, the hand-waving hall is mostly rectangular in shape and has a "courtyard in front and temple in the back". As the main building, the temple adopts a through-beam wooden structural frame. The eaves and wing corners of the roof present a unique flying eaves shape, reflecting the traditional wooden construction skills and aesthetic style of the Tujia ethnic group. The temple's main hall enshrines statues or tablets of gods and ancestors, most of which are statues of the three Tujia ancestors (Duke Peng, Grand Official Xiang, and Mr. Tian). Some statues are wrapped in red cloth that has been worn over the years so that the original appearance of the Tusi king cannot be seen, which further highlights his mystery (Qiu et al. 2022). The sacrificial procedures of the hand-waving sacrifice, such as sweeping the hall, inviting the gods, and setting the tablets, are all performed in the temple. The courtyard in front of the temple is usually a vertical rectangle surrounded by a long stone wall to prevent people outside the tribe or village from watching. The courtyard is large, with a "sacred tree" in the middle, forming the center of the space and the ritual center of the hand-waving dance. The hand-waving hall serves as a medium for communication between the gods and ancestors and the secular

people. Through the temple, the courtyard, and the sacred tree, the hall organically integrates Heaven, Earth, and man; strengthens the spatial field where the Tujia ethnic group are present together with the gods and ancestors throughout the hand-waving sacrifice; and reflects the material space style under the cultural concept of "harmony between man and nature" 天人合一 of the Tujia ancestors.

For instance, according to a study, the Shemihu 舍米湖 hand-waving hall (Figure 7) in Laifeng County, Hubei Province, was built in the eighth year of the Shunzhi reign of the Qing Dynasty (1651). It is located on the hillside of Xiaojigong Mountain in the south of the village, facing the water and its back to the mountain. The hall enshrines three Tujia ancestors. On the central axis of the hall is a stone corridor leading directly to the courtyard gate. The vertical rectangular courtyard covers an area of about 550 square meters (Deng and Li 2013). The site selection and spatial layout of the Shemihu hand-waving hall indicate that the hall and the courtyard are two spaces that are different but internally related. The Tujia ethnic group holds that the hall is where the gods and ancestors live. Furthermore, it is also the core place where the gods and ancestors receive worship from their descendants. It is the central space of the absolute sacred space. Even when holding ancestor worship ceremonies, the tribesmen can only stand outside the hall's threshold to pay homage. The courtyard outside the hall is an auxiliary space of the sacred space. After the sacrificial ceremony, the waving dance activities are conducted in this space to entertain the gods and themselves. The clear division of space and the clan rules and traditions that do not cross the line are necessary for the spiritual expression of the Tujia ethnic group's reverence and worship of their ancestors. For thousands of years, the Tujia ethnic group maintained and passed on their national beliefs and ethnic relations in this specific space.

Figure 7. The Shemihu hand-waving hall in Laifeng County, Hubei Province.

3.2. Sacred Tree and Spatial Construction

The gods worshipped in the Tujia ethnic group's hand-waving sacrifice have evolved from primitive worship to polytheism and from nature worship to personality worship. This not only reflects the polytheistic belief system of the Tujia ethnic group but also indicates the close association with their historical development, national psychological identity, and cultural exchange. Specifically, the first gods worshipped were natural gods (the sacred trees) and then totem gods (the tiger gods). Throughout the vassal state and county period, the worship of the eight great gods arose in confrontation with powerful forces. When agricultural production developed, the gods of grains and land were worshipped. Throughout the period of Tusi rule from the Yuan, Ming, and early Qing dynasties, the Tusi kings and cultural heroes recognized by the Tujia ethnic group were worshipped. Most of

the Tusi kings we see today are worshipped in the hand-waving halls, which have been inseparable from the far-reaching influence of the Tusi rule system for more than 400 years.

Among various gods, the original worship of the sacred tree did not decline or disappear with the historical evolution of the object of faith. It has always stood in the center of the courtyard of the hand-waving hall, developed into the central symbol of the hand-waving dance space, and participated in the construction of the overall ritual space. As a mountain ethnic group living in the Wuling Mountain area for generations, the Tujia ethnic group holds that forests and trees are vital to their lives. The fuel needed for daily life and the materials for building houses are taken from the mountains and forests, and the strong vitality of trees makes them feel awe. As a consequence, all Tujia villages have the custom of worshiping big trees: they fix iron nails around the big trees to prevent people from cutting them down, they cover the big trees with colorful red decorations and offer sacrifices to them during festivals, they pray for the blessing of the ancient trees for their children, they ask the ancient trees for medicine when their family members are sick, etc. (Interview Record, 2021).

The towering sacred tree in the center of the hand-waving hall is the Pushe Tree 普舍树 (a sacred tree descended from the sky in Tujia folklore) recorded in the *Huguang Tongzhi* 湖广通志 during the reign of Emperor Kangxi:

> There is a tree in Manshui Village, Shizhou, named Pushe Tree. Pushe means elegance in Chinese. In the past, the ancestor of the Qin family cut down a strange tree at Dongmen Pass. The tree followed the flow to Nache, where it took root and grew again, with hundreds of flowers blooming in all seasons. The descendants of the Qin family sang and danced under it, and the flowers fell by themselves, so they took them and wore them in their hairpins. When other families sang there, the flowers did not fall. It was particularly unusual. 施州漫水寨有木，名普舍树。普舍者，华言风流也。昔覃氏祖于东门关伐一异木，随流至那车，复生根而活，四时开百种花。覃氏子孙歌舞其下，花乃自落，取而簪之。他姓往歌，花不复落。尤为异也。 (*Tongzhi Laifeng Xianzhi·zazhuizhi* 同治《来凤县志·杂缀志》 [*Tongzhi Laifeng County Annals: Miscellaneous Records*] 1998)

The folk tale of the *Hand-waving Dance and the Pushe Tree* in Laifeng County further explains this record:

> Legend has it that a spring rain a long time ago caused a flood in the Youshui River Basin. One night, a strange tree floated down the river and took root in front of the door of a man named Qin. The next morning, the old man of the Qin family was surprised to see the tree with green branches and leaves and full of flower buds. He didn't know whether it was a blessing or a curse, so he quickly summoned the old and the young to kneel down under the tree, and the flood subsided. Once the story spread, the surrounding neighbors jumped under the tree, and the flower buds on the tree grew countless red, green and white flowers, which was the Pushe Tree. The dance performed around the Pushe Tree is the hand-waving Dance. 传说很久以前的一场春雨造成酉水流域水灾。一天晚上，顺水飘来一异木，在一覃姓门前生根。次日晨，覃家老人惊见此树青枝绿叶，满树花苞，不知是福还是祸，急召老小在树下跪拜，结果洪水消退。此事一传开，周围乡邻齐拥树下跳跃，满树花苞遂生出无数红绿白花，即普舍树。围着普舍树跳的舞就是摆手舞。 (Tian et al. 2007, p. 57)

In support of the idea of harmony between man and nature, the sacred tree is indispensable in the ritual space of the hand-waving hall. The Tujia ethnic group regards it as the tree of the universe and the medium for villagers to communicate with the gods. It is said that the big trees in the center of the hand-waving hall courtyards in Shemihu and

other places are all remains of the early worship of sacred trees[3] (Interview Record, 2021). As a vertical axis, the sacred tree connects Heaven and Earth. Its branches extend upward to symbolize connection with the world of gods, and its roots go deep into the land to metaphorically represent the roots of the ethnic group. In the plane layout, the sacred tree is located in the center of the courtyard, and the circular waving dance unfolds with the tree trunk as the center of the circle, forming a centripetal space. This spatial construction with natural objects as the carrier realizes the dual integration of the physical field and the spiritual world.

3.3. Ritual and Spatial Construction

3.3.1. Process

The traditional hand-waving sacrifice is a collective activity. The complete process includes four stages: "inviting gods-offering sacrifices to gods-entertaining gods-bidding farewell to gods". It starts on the third day of the first lunar month and lasts from three to seven days and has a strict time order (Figure 8). Using the three-day period as an example, on the morning of the first day, the Tima (the master of the altar, a religious clergyman of the Tujia ethnic group—the medium between the Tujia ethnic group and the gods) led the people to the mountains to collect "sacred wood" (lilac branches). At noon, the "sacred flag" was erected in front of the hand-waving hall. At night, the "opening altar and singing ancestors" epic recitation was held; the next day, sacrificial activities and collective hand-waving dances were carried out; on the third day, after "bidding farewell to gods", the participants shared the sacrificial meat, completing the sanctification cycle of people and gods eating together (Zhao 2014). This time structure is essentially a cultural coding system.

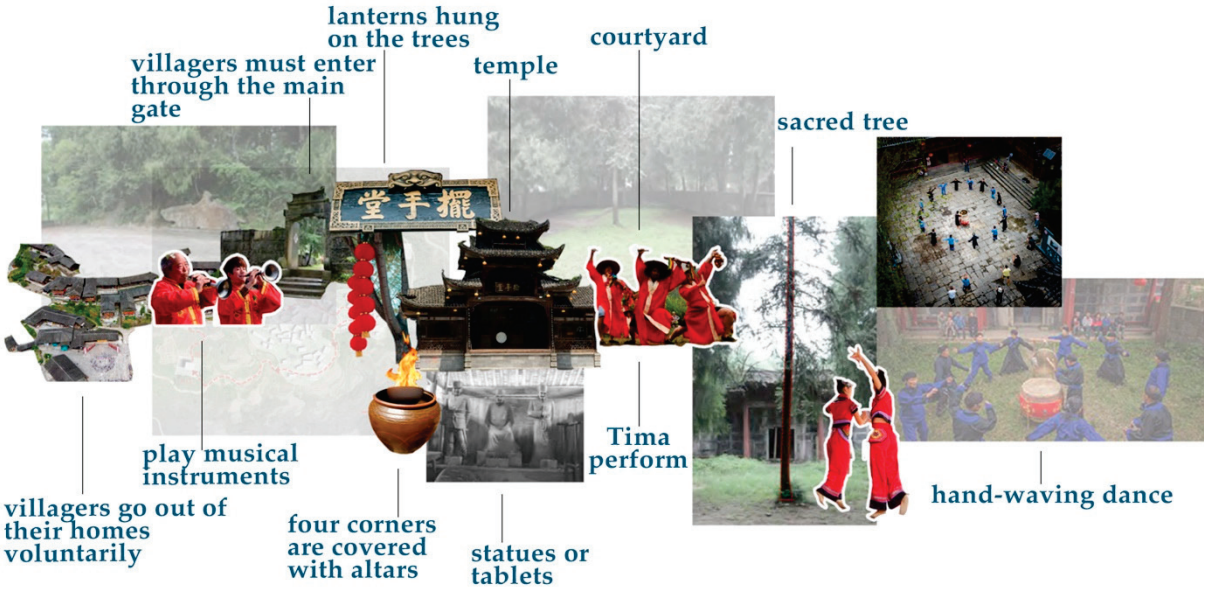

Figure 8. The process of the hand-waving sacrifice.

(1) Inviting the gods: At the beginning of the hand-waving sacrifice ritual, the tribesmen, led by the Tima, set out from a specific location in the village and slowly walked along the predetermined route to the hand-waving hall. The Tima summoned the gods throughout the march by chanting incantations, singing scriptures, ringing bells, etc. The team's steps were neat and solemn, as if crossing the secular and sacred boundaries. When the team stepped into the hand-waving hall, people entered the mysterious and awe-inspiring sacred space from the daily secular space. This spatial transformation was strengthened

through the physical perception and psychological experience of the ritual participants, symbolizing the transition from the human world to the divine world (Figure 9).

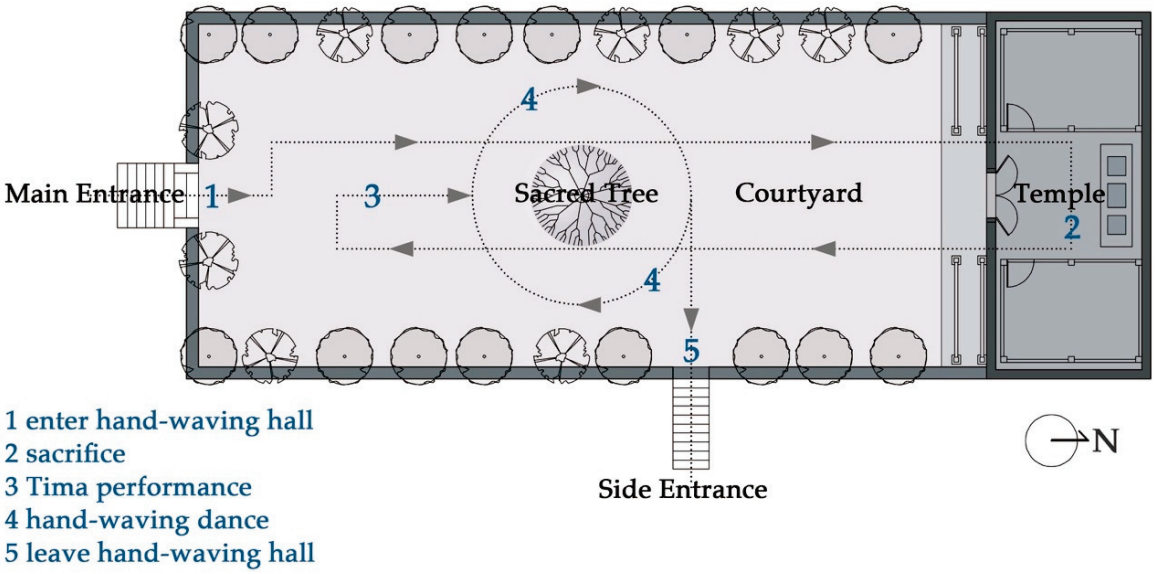

Figure 9. The process of the hand-waving sacrifice in the hand-waving hall.

(2) Offering sacrifices to the gods: The offering ceremony is held in the shrine of the hand-waving hall, which is the core of the hand-waving sacrifice ceremony. The first procedure is "sweeping the hall", in which the Tima leads several people to draw talismans, chant spells, and use brooms to clean the hand-waving hall to prevent evil things from entering. The second procedure is "inviting the gods into the hall". First, dozens of people present offerings, holding plates above their heads with both hands and marching forward in two rows with large strides. After the offerings are presented on the table, the Tima performs divination. If the bamboo basket divination illustrates that both sides are facing upwards or one is facing up and the other is facing down, it means that the gods have been invited successfully, indicating that the ancestors have moved to the hand-waving hall and can be placed in their tablets. The third procedure is "setting the tablets". The Tima reports the names of various offerings to the gods and invites them to enjoy them. After the report, the Tima burns incense and paper; the ceremony participants bow and kowtow; and ox horns, trumpets, earthen flutes, gongs and drums, firecrackers, etc., sound together.

(3) Entertaining the gods: The ceremony takes place in the courtyard. First, the Tima sings ancient sacrificial songs to invite the gods and ancestors to enter the ritual area. Then, the Tima performs Tujia traditions such as stilt walking and knife climbing and sings the merits of the ancestors. The performance transforms the courtyard into a symbolic sacred space and provides a physical space for the Tima to entertain the gods. Afterward, the tribe members perform the hand-waving dance around the central sacred tree. Throughout the dance, the sacred tree in the courtyard's center is hung with lanterns. Under the sacred tree, a big drum or a bonfire is set up, and the strong villagers take turns beating the drums to demonstrate to the gods the hard work, bravery, and love of life of the tribe members. Simultaneously, they pray for the gods to bless the weather, yield good harvests, and ensure the prosperity of people and livestock. In this process, the ritual space becomes a sacred place where people and gods coexist, and the tribe members gain a strong sacred experience and ethnic identity.

(4) Bidding farewell to the gods: This marks the end of the ceremony. The Tima again uses specific ritual movements and lyrics to pour the libation wine into the fire, burn hell

bank notes, and respectfully send the gods back to Heaven. The ritual team slowly walks out of the side door of the hand-waving hall along the opposite route to the invitation of the gods. The ceremony of bidding farewell to the gods symbolizes a farewell to the gods and a return of the tribe from the sacred space to the secular space. It allows the sacredness of the hand-waving hall ritual space to be fully presented and closed and lays the foundation for the next ritual cycle.

3.3.2. Path

The hand-waving hall is a ritual building in the village. Villagers only visit it during major festivals. In order to maintain the sacredness of the hand-waving hall, participants must enter from the main gate and leave from the side gate during the hand-waving ceremony. When entering, they must walk through the steps, the courtyard, and the sacred tree and wait outside the hall for the end of the ancestor worship. This ritual path is highly consistent with the central axis of the hand-waving hall. There are no extra furnishings in the courtyard where the tribesmen wait, and only two rows of ancient cypresses are placed on both sides of the courtyard. Their arrangement parallels the ritual axis, guiding the tribesmen to worship the gods and ancestors.

Throughout the hand-waving dance ceremony, as the participants' behavior paths change, a circular ritual path centered on the sacred tree is formed in the square space of the hand-waving hall, expressing the Tujia ethnic group's ancient spatial philosophy of "the sky is round and the earth is square" and the vast scene in a limited space. Simultaneously, dancing allows the Tujia ethnic group to express reverence for the gods. All movements are derived from the production and living methods of the ethnic group since ancient times, such as migration, farming, fishing, and hunting. They deem that every body movement can reflect the ethnic epic and ritual significance. As a ritual dance, the hand-waving dance can establish a connection with the sacred world.

3.3.3. Direction

As a remote minority in China, the Tujia ethnic group began to implement the Tusi system in the Wuling Corridor region in the late Five Dynasties (928) to strengthen the central dynasty's rule over the southwest region. It lasted 818 years until the 13th year of Yongzheng's reign in the Qing Dynasty (1735), when the Tusi system was incorporated into the local administrative department (Huang 2022). For this reason, the order of orientation, the order of the sacrificial personnel, and the order of the sacrificial objects in the hand-waving sacrifice ritual were influenced by the comprehensive influence of the patriarchal rituals of the Han culture in the Central Plains and local witchcraft culture. According to the data distribution analysis above, the hand-waving hall has the spatial characteristics of developing along the river and carrying out cultural contacts with the help of the water system. The influence of Han culture is also more significant in the major river basins.

The hand-waving sacrificial ritual reflects the order of respect and inferiority in Han culture. Nonetheless, unlike the cultural custom of the Central Plains region, where the east is the host, the west is the guest, the south is superior, and the north is inferior, the respect and inferiority of the hand-waving sacrificial ceremony are defined by Feng Shui 风水. After the Feng Shui master determines the location of the hand-waving hall, the orientation of the statue in the hall is determined. The statue usually faces the gate and is set along the central axis of the building in line with the sacred tree. The direction where the statue is located is the superior position, and the opposite direction is the inferior one, thus forming the unique orientation of respect and inferiority of the Tujia ethnic group.

The distribution order of the sacrificial personnel also complies with the Han ethnic rituals of hierarchy. Only the Tima and the prestigious elders in the village can enter the

temple, with ancestors being respected, clan members being inferior, the elders being on top, and the young being on the bottom, forming a ritual system in which everyone has their duties within the sacrificial space.

The distribution order of the objects of worship in the temple also indirectly reflects the Tujia ethnic group's understanding of the association between direction and power. Throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Tujia area was influenced by Confucianism and changed from nature worship to ancestor worship. Since Duke Peng was the highest in the minds of the Tujia ethnic group, the arrangement of the ancestral statues placed Duke Peng in the center. At the same time, Grand Official Xiang was a famous military general and Mr. Tian was a symbol of diligence and wisdom. Of the two, one was martial and one was civil. In accordance with the Tujia ethnic group's ancient martial arts and "left noble and right light" cultural habitus, Grand Official Xiang was on the left and Mr. Tian was on the right. For this reason, although the temple building itself is similar to the structural system and construction method of the ethnic residential buildings, when the ancestral statues are placed here, the space is different from any other space and has a cosmological symbolic meaning.

3.4. Construction of Ritual Space Boundaries

3.4.1. Material Boundaries

The traditional ritual space is usually defined by the absolute opposition between the sacred and the secular, and its boundaries are maintained by taboo and purification rituals (Durkheim 1915, pp. 81–86). Meanwhile, as a specific "cultural field", the access rules and behavioral norms of the ritual space constitute implicit screening mechanisms to exclude "outsiders", wherein participants' bodily practices serve both as embodied reinforcement of pre-existing habitus and as a process of internalizing new social norms (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 170–75).

Historically, the hand-waving sacrifice ritual space had clear material boundaries, namely, the dozens of boundary markers erected outside the hand-waving hall courtyard walls, which were set up to establish a clear and secret ritual space. In the past, when the hand-waving sacrifice ritual was held, it was strictly forbidden for people other than the tribe members to cross the boundary markers and enter the ritual space or peek in. If outsiders broke in, they would be made into "human head sacrifices" (Zhang 2011, p. 116). The reason for formulating such strict rules is that, throughout history, most Tujia ancestors were forced to migrate constantly for refuge and eventually lived in seclusion in the mountains. If the migration songs sung by the Tima during the hand-waving sacrifice were heard by outsiders, they would be hunted down by their enemies. As a result, dozens of boundary markers were erected outside the hand-waving hall as a boundary warning for the ritual space (Zhang 2011, p. 95). Although this hatred has long been diluted by time after thousands of years, the habitus of setting up boundary markers and not allowing outsiders to enter has been preserved. The material boundary established by the boundary markers delimits the scope of the ritual field outside the ritual space of the hand-waving hall formed by the courtyard, the sacred tree, and the temple. It becomes the place where the ritual stops or starts and is also the key node for the mutual transformation between the sacred and the secular.

3.4.2. Mental Boundaries

The spiritual boundary is reflected in the mutual construction of material symbols, cultural habitus, and belief systems. Material symbols are used to establish the scope of the ritual field, while the cultural habitus and belief systems of the ethnic group included

in the spiritual boundary constitute the endogenous driving force of the ritual operation (Rappaport 1999, pp. 24–26).

The habitus that constructs the belief system of hand-waving sacrifice primarily includes the orthodoxy of worshipping the gods and ancestors, the authenticity of myths and legends, and the inviolability of ritual behavior. This belief system is also strengthened through the identity stratification of participants. For the general public, it predominantly includes the ceremony's sponsors, organizers, leaders, participants, etc. In the past, a Tujia village was usually a big family. The villagers had the same surname (Peng and Tian were the most common), so they had a strong sense of collective identity and consensus of belief. In their eyes, the three ancestors worshipped in the hand-waving sacrifice ceremony are the most important rulers and protectors in the history of the Tujia ethnic group, and they must be worshipped devoutly during the sacrifice. In addition, they also firmly believe in the authenticity of ethnic epics as well as myths and legends, and they interpret various legends in a unified folk belief through a local logic and efficacy index 灵验指数 (Peng 2012), which also forms the inviolability of worshipping the gods and ancestors before the hand-waving dance celebration. In the hand-waving sacrifice ritual, once this belief system is generated, it is constantly internalized into people's consciousness, continually shaping the ritual members within the field, who use it as a carrier to pass on ethnic culture from generation to generation.

4. Secular: Contemporary Changes in the Ritual Space of the Hand-Waving Sacrifice

4.1. Diversification of Spatial Functions and Secular Transformation

4.1.1. Publicization of Ritual Venues

Following Emperor Yongzheng's implementation of the policy of bureaucratizing native officers in 1735, the hand-waving sacrifice persisted due to cultural habits, but the frequency of its observance and the construction of hand-waving halls notably declined. The ritual gradually shed its original political attributes, transitioning toward an expression of ethnic identity. In the 1950s, the newly established Chinese government began identifying various ethnic minorities, and the Tujia ethnic group was initially identified as part of the Miao ethnic group (Ma and Zheng 2004). In order to strive for a single ethnic identity, the local government began to organize and revive the hand-waving sacrifice ritual as a core symbol of Tujia identity. In a sense, this cultural event reflects the Tujia ethnic group's pursuit of "ethnic identity recognition".

For this reason, the 1950s became an important dividing line between the traditional and modern hand-waving sacrifice rituals, but until the 1990s, their restoration was intermittent. On the one hand, since most hand-waving halls were destroyed, the rituals lacked the original venues, and some were changed to open spaces or squares in the village. The change in venues led to a decrease in the villagers' sense of identity. On the other hand, attributable to the intervention of the local county-level cultural center and the adaptation of dance movements, the hand-waving dance was separated from the original sacrificial activities and became a program that toured other places. The local villagers were relatively unfamiliar and resistant to this adapted hand-waving dance (Wang and Bai 2022). After the 21st century, with the strengthening of communication between ethnic minority areas and the outside world and the rise of contemporary social–cultural industries and tourism, local governments in the Wuling Corridor restored the authentic hand-waving sacrificial ceremony and dance movements. In 2008, the Tujia hand-waving dance was included in the first batch of China's intangible cultural heritage list. The sacred ceremony that initially had to be held in a specific, closed space has also begun to transform into a public cultural activity, which is predominantly manifested in two aspects.

First, the function of cultural display and the tourism economy is highlighted. The hand-waving hall has gradually changed from a simple religious ceremony site to a complex functional space integrating cultural display and tourism. An exhibition area has been added to display the Tujia ethnic group's historical relics, traditional costumes, handicrafts, and other cultural heritage (He 2022). The space in front of the hall, which was initially used for Tima performances and tribe dances, has also been extended to the village assembly square, where hand-waving dance performances and folk programs are held regularly (accommodating a large number of tourists, who watch), and has shifted from the original "entertaining gods" to "entertaining people". This change in spatial function has made the hand-waving sacrifice hall move from a relatively closed religious holy place to a more open secular stage, becoming an important brand and image representative of local cultural tourism.

Second, it serves as an expansion of the community's public activity space. In modern society, the social structure and lifestyle of the Tujia community have undergone significant changes. As the core public space of the community, the hand-waving hall, in addition to hosting traditional religious ceremonies and cultural exhibitions, has become a venue for various public activities by adding daily affairs functions, such as village meetings, art performances, and sports competitions. These secular public activities have enhanced the community's cohesion and sense of belonging and have made the hand-waving hall more closely connected with the daily lives of community residents, further accelerating its transformation from a sacred to a secular space.

4.1.2. Stage-Based Ritual Space

The ritual space of the hand-waving sacrifice has taken on a stage-like character under the influence of the tourism economy, cultural consumption, and cultural reproduction, which is also a change made by traditional folk activities in adapting to the development of modern society. This change has made the local belief space public. Simultaneously, local cultural practitioners have reconstructed the traditional ritual space in order to promote cultural consumption and reproduction (DiMaggio and Useem 2017, pp. 181–201).

For the Tujia ethnic group, the hand-waving hall is a sacrificial site with cultural memory. This ritual space can provide contemporary people with a sense of "authenticity" through its "historical sense". For this reason, to restore the "real" scene of this cultural symbol, the government has promoted the repair and restoration of hand-waving halls in some places in the Wuling Corridor.

For instance, according to a study, a hand-waving hall in the middle reaches of the Youshui River, Shuangfeng Village, Yongshun County, Hunan Province, has undergone four reconstructions. Its ultimate goal is to restore the ritual space while being more suitable for stage performance effects. After reconstruction, this ritual space (Figure 10) first broke the closed space defined by the original courtyard wall and the outer boundary monument. It changed the original longitudinal rectangular space form into a circular space more suitable for supporting the body movements involved in the hand-waving dance—the hand-waving terrace. Second, the original one-story, simple-style temple building was transformed into a three-story Tuwang Temple with a four-tiered hip roof and complex and exquisite decorations, which not only enhanced the ritual sense and importance of the building but also highlighted it as the stage background of the central hand-waving terrace. Last, a corridor-style auditorium was added to the periphery of the hand-waving terrace, facing the Tuwang Temple from a distance and breaking the mysterious rule that outsiders are not allowed to see the traditional sacrificial ceremony. This move makes the ritual performance more stage-like (Interview Record, 2023). The ceremony's main priest and participants (performers) occupy the center of the space, and tourists and other villagers

constitute bystanders outside the center. While gazing, they also invisibly reconstruct a new ritual field for the central performers and change its meaning.

Figure 10. The rebuilt hand-waving hall, Shuangfeng Village, Yongshun County, Hunan Province.

4.2. Ritual Simplification and Symbol Translation

4.2.1. Process Simplification and Contemporary Communication

The complete process of the traditional hand-waving sacrifice carries the temporal order and spiritual beliefs of the Tujia farming society. The three- to seven-day cycle (comprising cleansing the altar to invite the gods, offering sacrifices to the gods, entertaining the gods, and sending the gods back to the mountains) is not only a religious practice but also a periodic cultural cohesion activity of the ethnic group that effectively materializes abstract collective consciousness into perceptible cultural order (Parsons 1966, pp. 55–59). With the accelerating pace of modern society and the growth of the demand for cultural communication, sacrifices generally suggest a trend of simplification. Especially as a sacrificial act for exhibition, it omits the procedures of sweeping the hall, inviting the gods, and setting the tablets. It directly jumps to raising the dragon and phoenix flags, offering tributes on trays, the main priest burning incense and paper, and everyone bowing and kowtowing. The ancestor worship ceremony ends, and then the hand-waving dance begins. Although the core part of the traditional sacrificial ceremony is retained, it also caters to the selective display of the current stage process of the ceremony, compressing the ceremony into a 1–2 h performance.

The specific logic of simplification is as follows: (1) The flexibility of the holding time: The traditional hand-waving sacrifice ceremony strictly follows the Chinese lunar calendar and is held in the first month of the lunar year. Nevertheless, modern performances are often adjusted to weekends to match the tourist schedule, and two performances are launched every day during the Golden Week (national holidays) in May and October. The flexibility of time also eliminates the sacred connotation of the original ritual periodicity. (2) The deletion of ritual links: For instance, the past animal "blood sacrifice" was canceled, and the "inviting gods" link was simplified from Tima going into the mountains alone to the inheritor taking out the pre-made god banner from the prop room. This "de-witchcraft" and "de-risking" transformation further reduced the ritual from a human–god contract to a cultural performance. (3) The functional transformation of the priest's authority: The role of the master of the altar, Tima, was replaced by the inheritor of intangible cultural heritage, and his identity changed from "spiritualist" to "narrator". Field surveys illustrate that some inheritors can no longer recite scriptures in the ancient Tujia language and instead use Mandarin to convey the meaning of the actions.

Although this adjustment has removed some of the tradition, it is also grounded in the realistic considerations of cultural inheritance in the contemporary context. It concurrently provides a new path for the contemporary dissemination of the hand-waving sacrifice. On the one hand, short-term performances are more adapted to the viewing rhythm of modern tourism and are more likely to attract the attention of a large number of tourists; on the other hand, the inheritors of intangible cultural heritage use standardized movements and multimedia explanations to enable the hand-waving sacrifice to break through geographical restrictions and give it the ability of universal cross-cultural dissemination. Data illustrate that the number of performances of hand-waving sacrifice in the Wuling Mountain area in 2022 increased 9.3 times compared to 10 years prior, and the audience covered expanded from a single village to an average of about 2.45 million tourists per year (statistics from the Hunan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism).

4.2.2. Cultural Symbol Translation and Value Reconstruction

The cultural translation of the hand-waving hall focuses on the dialectical integration of traditional forms and modern functions. The "herringbone" double-slope roof, the through-beam wooden structure, and the centripetal pattern of the sacred tree of the traditional hand-waving hall are refined in the core design vocabulary. Through the innovation of architectural structure, materials, and spatial narrative, the traditional architectural language becomes an active medium to activate cultural identity and realize the regeneration of cultural symbols. The "hand-waving Cultural Center" in Laoche Village, Longshan County, Hunan Province, reproduces the curve of the traditional roof with a steel–wood hybrid structure. The top is covered with local fir tiles. The eaves retain the animal-faced tile symbols, but prestressed technology is used to expand the internal span to meet the needs of exhibitions and performances. Similarly, regarding the movement symbols of the dance in the hand-waving sacrifice—such as the "single pendulum" simulating slash-and-burn farming, the "double pendulum" reproducing the cooperation of fishing and hunting, and the "revolving pendulum" metaphor of the spiral route of tribal migration—each movement conveys the body language of the oral epic. Through technical translation and artistic innovation, it has derived multiple forms of expression. Youyang County, Chongqing, established a "hand-waving Dance Movement Gene Bank" and used motion capture technology to record 367 sets of movements of 12 hand-waving dance inheritors so that the hand-waving dance symbols can be integrated into contemporary dance art creation and transformed into digital animation and interactive games (He 2022). In addition, traditional idols can also be transformed into tangible public art symbols. Pengjiazhai in Xuanen County, Hubei Province, uses the "Eight Great Kings" idol as a prototype to design a series of cultural and creative products, such as bronze bookmarks, embroidered hanging paintings, and blind box figurines. The designer retains the core symbols of the idol, such as the tiger head pattern and flame eyebrows, while incorporating cartoon processing to attract young consumers (Interview Record, 2024).

Overall, the symbolic translation of the hand-waving sacrifice is not an isolated phenomenon but an ecosystem for cultural reproduction by linking space, body, and objects. This synergistic effect enhances the effectiveness of cultural communication; its communication effect extends beyond the historical spatial characteristics of cultural connections relying on water systems and stimulates the endogenous power of the community. Since 2021, 23 new cultural cooperation institutions associated with the hand-waving sacrifice have been created in the Wuling Mountain area, and the annual income of villagers has increased by 14% (research by the Rural Revitalization Research Institute of South-Central Minzu University).

4.3. Extension and Redefinition of Boundaries

4.3.1. Physical Expansion: Spatial Collage of New and Old Landscapes

The expansion of the physical boundaries of the hand-waving hall is essentially a spatial projection of the game between globalization and localism. When juxtaposing the newly built cultural square, tourism-supporting facilities, and the traditional hand-waving hall, the closedness of the traditional space is broken, forming a "time and space folding" landscape collage. With the assistance of functional compounding and technological innovation, the sacredness is integrated into modern society more inclusively (Harvey 1990, pp. 240–47; Debord [1967] 1994, p. 165).

In the Cultural Square of Furong Town, Yongshun County, Hunan Province (Figure 11), the ruins of the hand-waving hall, which was originally built in the Qing Dynasty, were included in the overall planning of the public cultural facilities of the "National Cultural Complex", and a spatial collage was made with the newly built square and intangible cultural heritage exhibition hall. In the core protection area, the original hand-waving hall is the "historical core", and the traditional sacrificial layout is retained inside. Small ceremonies are held regularly by intangible cultural heritage inheritors. In the live performance area, the square atrium reproduces the form of the traditional hand-waving hall courtyard, and young dancers perform the hand-waving dance on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar calendar every month. Unlike tourist performances, these performances strictly follow the process of "inviting gods-offering sacrifices to gods-entertaining gods-bidding farewell to gods" (Interview Record, 2021). Observation data in 2023 illustrated that about 71% of local young people re-established local cultural identity through such activities (Tan 2024). In the community service area, intangible cultural heritage exhibition halls, libraries, and elderly activity centers are set up outside the square to integrate the cultural symbols of hand-waving sacrifice into daily life. Simultaneously, digital technology has also become a new medium for supporting tradition. With the assistance of virtual reality (VR) to restore the ritual, tourists can wear VR equipment to "participate" in the entire process of the historical hand-waving sacrifice. The immersive experience provided by modern technology also allows young people to better understand the ritual itself and its deep logic. This spatial collage of new and old landscapes symbolizes a creative transformation of sacredness—when traditional space breaks through physical boundaries, its cultural energy radiates further.

Figure 11. The cultural square in Furong Town, Yongshun County, Hunan Province.

4.3.2. Generalization of Meaning: The Public Rebirth of Sacred Values

The generalization of the meaning of the hand-waving sacrifice space is essentially the transformation of its spiritual core from ethnic belief to public cultural resource. Through community building and popularization via education, its sacredness is integrated into local public life and cultural construction in a more universal value form.

In community building, the hand-waving hall has been transformed through spatial renovation and functional expansion, such as the addition of detachable seats and multimedia equipment, to become a space for villagers to discuss public affairs, perform art performances, or utilize its square as a sports competition space. In education, the hand-waving hall space has been redefined as a "living classroom". Its sacredness has been transformed into the cultural foundation of educational practice by building it into a university study base and participating in international cultural exchanges. For instance, in 2021, the Xuanen County Government of Hubei Province, together with the School of Architecture, Southeast University and the Università IUAV di Venezia, established the "China-Italy International Architecture Research Camp" to guide scholars in the field of architecture in enhancing the protection and regeneration research of the Tujia stilt wooden architectural heritage represented by the hand-waving hall. The researchers were invited to present their results in the official parallel exhibition of the 17th Venice International Architecture Biennale (LIANGHEKOU, a Tujia Village of Re-Living-Together) (Figure 12). Simultaneously, an intangible cultural heritage course on the traditional construction techniques of stilt houses was created to provide popular science education on Chinese traditional architectural culture for primary and secondary school students, non-architecture students, tourists, and the general public and establish a deep empathy for tradition (Min et al. 2022).

Figure 12. Official parallel exhibition of the 17th Venice International Architecture Biennale.

The dissolution of boundaries and generalization of meaning in the hand-waving sacrifice space also demonstrate the adaptive wisdom of traditional culture in dealing with the impact of modernity from another perspective. The sacredness has not been eliminated by the expansion of space. Instead, it has gained a richer form of existence through functional integration, technological empowerment, and value translation. When the ritual space moved from a closed sanctuary to an open public domain, its spiritual core also completed the sublimation from "ethnic belief" to "human shared heritage". This fluid rebirth proves that the vitality of traditional culture does not lie in sticking to boundaries, but in continuing genes in reconstruction with an open attitude, activating new life in transformation, and forming a "historical-contemporary" space-time dialogue.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Ritual space is never merely a static physical container; its essence is a multilayered realm embodying cultural, power, and social relations (Giddens 1990, p. 18), manifesting as a concrete, experiential product of spatial practice that mirrors societal transformations across eras (Lefebvre 1991, p. 33). As a powerful carrier of regional culture and national culture, the hand-waving sacrifice ritual provides insight into the development of the Tujia ethnic group (who have lived in the Wuling Corridor since the historical Ba State) to a minority group living in seclusion in the mountains and forests and then integrating into contemporary society through the evolution of its ritual space. This study uses the interaction of "space-ritual" as a clue to specifically analyze how the sacredness of the ritual space was constructed by the isomorphic correlation between the hand-waving hall architecture and the hand-waving sacrifice ritual in history, as well as the mechanism of the continuous secularization of the hand-waving sacrificial space in contemporary society. Concurrently, it also reveals that in the transformation from sacred to secular, from worshiping gods to entertaining people, and from sacrifice to celebration, this primitive sacrificial belief's evolution to social art culture has become a microcosm of the survival strategy of ethnic minority regional culture in the wave of modernity. As far as local traditions are concerned, expanding the space of survival by generalizing meaning while protecting cultural genes is an issue worthy of discussion and attention.

First, for the Tujia ethnic group, who only have spoken language but lack a written system, the hand-waving sacrifice ritual space provides a unique mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory through the conspiracy of material symbols and physical practice. This mechanism breaks through the cognitive framework centered on written records and provides a new perspective for understanding the cultural survival of non-literate ethnic groups. The architectural form and natural landscape of the hand-waving hall constitute a "memory field" (Nora 1996, pp. 1–20), transforming abstract historical narratives into tangible and perceptible material entities. This spatial coding that reflects the mapping of the directional universe makes the material environment a topological structure of ethnic group memory. The hand-waving dance was originally a narrative language that simulated farming and hunting, and each movement was a physical translation of the oral epic, embedding historical memory into physical habits. Nonetheless, in transforming from sacred to secular space, the traditional hand-waving sacrifice ritual also faces the dual challenges of the decontextualization of material carriers and the performativeness of physical practice.

Second, the transformation of the hand-waving sacrificial space from sacred to secular is essentially the adaptive reconstruction of its social function in terms of modernization (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, pp. 263–307). This process is not a simple functional replacement but a self-renewal of the cultural system through the superposition of functions and the replacement of meanings. The contemporary hand-waving sacrificial square, by combining religious rituals and entertainment needs, has been built into a traditional cultural education research classroom. It is a symbiotic model with multiple functions superimposed on the government-led promotion of local cultural tourism projects, presenting the composite characteristics of "sacred and secular integration". This cultural function transformation reflects the mechanism of influence of the flexible intervention of state power and cultural capital, as well as the various demands of intergenerational differentiation, such as the elderly needing the hand-waving hall to maintain their faith and young people seeing it as a social entertainment space.

Finally, traditional culture has fluid cultural resilience under the impact of modernity, and sacredness can be embedded in contemporary cultural space practice through symbolic translation, functional extension, etc. This study confirms that "sacred-secular"

is not a binary opposition paradigm. Although the sacredness of the hand-waving sacrifice space is transforming into secularity, it has not been completely replaced. Instead, it has been embedded in contemporary life in a new form through symbolic translation and functional extension. This "embedded sacredness" generation mechanism provides an ethnographic case for reflecting on the debate that "secularization inevitably leads to desacralization". Concurrently, there is a paradox with respect to sacredness reconstruction. While this reconstruction continues cultural life, it also buries a deep crisis: When the "embedded sacredness" of hand-waving sacrifice increasingly relies on the support of external systems (such as tourism income and policy support), its cultural autonomy continues to weaken. Hence, functional transformation is dialectical. Secularization is both a survival strategy for traditional culture and a source of crisis in terms of meaning dissipation. The key lies in maintaining the stability of core functions (such as cohesive cultural identity) (Bellah 1985, p. 35). Sacredness itself also has a fluid nature. It is a correlation network that is constantly reconstructed through practice, and its survival depends on the cultural subject's ability to adapt to a choice between tradition and modernity (Bourdieu 1977, p. 52).

Generally, the changes in the ritual space of the hand-waving sacrifice symbolize not merely a physical alternation of spatial form but a profound game of cultural subjectivity. The "memory field" of the non-literate ethnic groups faces a crisis of the deconstruction of traditional space in the wave of digitalization and globalization. It also gives rise to the reconstruction of new fields and a new inheritance form more suitable for disseminating local culture (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, pp. 102–8). This seemingly passive adaptation implies the initiative of the cultural subject: when the sacredness is released from fixed buildings and rituals and embedded in fluid symbols and practices, traditional culture can achieve resilience and survival in the context of globalization.

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Appendix A

Dot density estimation

Dot density estimation (DDE) was used to fit the spatial clustering characteristics and hotspot areas of Tujia villages (hand-waving halls) in the Wuling Corridor. By treating all traditional villages (hand-waving halls) as vector points in space, grounded in the point density analysis module of ArcGIS10.8 platform, the point feature density was calculated as the ratio of the number of all points in the neighborhood to the neighborhood area. Moreover, the spatial variation function of the point density was subjected to linear regression analysis to obtain the density distribution characteristics of Tujia villages (hand-waving halls) (Min and Zhang 2024a). The calculation formula is as follows:

$$F(x) = \frac{1}{nh} \sum_{i=1}^{n} k\left[\frac{d(x - x_i)}{h}\right] \quad \text{(A1)}$$

where $F(x)$ denotes the DDE value of point x, n refers to the number of traditional Tujia villages (hand-waving halls), d suggests the dimensionality, and $(x - x_i)$ represents the distance from the estimated point x to the sample point x_i. The closer to the center point, the higher the DDE value, and, moreover, the more significant the trend in concentrated distribution of hand-waving halls.

Appendix B

Standard deviation ellipse analysis

Standard Development Ellipse (SDE) is a spatial statistical method that can accurately probe into the multifaceted characteristics of the cross-spatial distribution of elements. Affected by geographical factors such as the direction of the mountains, the Tujia villages (hand-waving halls) in the Wuling Corridor are not evenly distributed in space. To explore the distribution of hand-waving halls from a cultural geography perspective, as well as the trajectory, influence, and direction of cross-village linkages, it is essential to observe the centrality, extension, and direction of the overall spatial distribution pattern of Tujia villages (hand-waving halls) in the Wuling Corridor. SDE quantitatively characterizes the distribution of Tujia villages (hand-waving halls) in space in different historical periods by generating an ellipse with the center, x-axis (long axis), y-axis (short axis), and azimuth as basic parameters. The calculation method is as follows:

$$\tan\theta = \frac{\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} \widetilde{x}_i^2 - \sum_{i=1}^{n} \widetilde{y}_i^2\right) + \sqrt{\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} \widetilde{x}_i^2 - \sum_{i=1}^{n} \widetilde{y}_i^2\right)^2 + 4\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} \widetilde{x}_i \widetilde{y}_i\right)^2}}{2\sum_{i=1}^{n} \widetilde{x}_i \widetilde{y}_i} \tag{A2}$$

$$\sigma_x = \sqrt{2}\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \left(\widetilde{x}_i \cos\theta - \widetilde{y}_i \sin\theta\right)^2}{n}} \tag{A3}$$

$$\sigma_y = \sqrt{2}\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \left(\widetilde{x}_i \sin\theta + \widetilde{y}_i \cos\theta\right)^2}{n}} \tag{A4}$$

Among them, the azimuth angle θ represents the main direction of the spatial distribution of the element, the x-axis (long axis) refers to the degree of deviation from the center of gravity in the main direction, and the y-axis (short axis) represents the degree of deviation from the center of gravity in the secondary direction. The larger the oblateness, the more obvious the directionality of the data and the greater the degree of dispersion; the smaller the gap, the more obvious the centripetal force of the data (Min and Zhang 2024b).

Notes

1 The history of the Tujia ethnic group's hand-waving sacrifice is at least more than 2000 years old. The "dance" mentioned in *Bai Hu Tong· Li Yue* 百虎通·礼乐, that "King Wu raised his army, singing first and dancing afterwards", refers to the war dance in the Tujia ethnic group's hand-waving dance. When King Wu defeated King Zhou, the ancestors of the Tujia ethnic group led the way for the king, and had the glorious feat of "singing and dancing to overthrow the Yin people and causing them to turn against him" (*Huayangguo Zhi·Ba Zhi* 华阳国志·巴志). Quoted from Yuan Ge's *Research on the Origin of Tujia ethnic group's hand-waving Dance*.

2 The first was during the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty when the government implemented the policy of bureaucratization of native officers. The Qing government abolished native officials and issued an order to ban many religious sacrificial activities and customs of the Tujia ethnic group in order to educate the Tujia ethnic group and vigorously promote "Confucianization". The traditional humanities and customs of the Tujia ethnic group, as well as the hand-waving hall religious building, which is a symbol of the Tusi system and combines customs, education, sacrifice, and entertainment, were severely impacted and damaged. The other time was in the 1970s.

3 In line with the master of the Shemihu hand-waving sacrifice dance, Mr. Peng Changsong, there used to be a huge fir tree in the middle of the hand-waving hall of Shemihu. People danced around the tree during the Spring Festival, but it was later cut

down. Later, people transplanted another fir tree into the Shemihu hand-waving sacrifice hall, and people still danced around the tree during the hand-waving sacrifice.

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Article

Domus Sapientiae: A Mariological and Christological Metaphor According to the Patristic, Theological, and Liturgical Tradition

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Abstract: This article sheds light on the repercussions of the *Proverbs* sentence "Wisdom has built her house" on Christian doctrine and on the Marian iconography of the Annunciation. To achieve his objectives, the author uses a double comparative analysis as a methodology. To begin with, he analyzes a vast *corpus* of texts in which numerous Fathers, theologians, and liturgical hymnographers of Eastern and Western Churches interpret this biblical locution according to Mariological and Christological projections. Secondly, he analyzes eight pictorial *Annunciations* from the Italian Renaissance in which Mary's house in Nazareth is depicted as a luxurious palace. As a result of these two sets of analyses, the author concludes that the interpretations of the Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers about the house built by Wisdom and the form of the house/palace in images of the Annunciation allude to the dogma of God the Son's supernatural human conception/incarnation in Mary's virginal womb.

Keywords: mariology; patristics; liturgical hymns; Christ's incarnation; divine motherhood; marian iconography; Renaissance painting

1. Introduction[1]

It is not unusual that, among the numerous praises dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the ancestral *Lauretan Litanies*, the title *Sedes Sapientiae* (Seat of Wisdom) stands out. In fact, this metaphorical designation is not surprising if one remembers that a sentence from *Proverbs* that proclaims *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* ("Wisdom has built her house". Prov 9:1).

Starting from the assumption that in the Judaic-Christian tradition the wisdom to which this biblical text alludes is synonymous with God, the Fathers, theologians, and liturgical hymnographers of the Greek-Eastern and Latin Churches interpreted this phrase from *Proverbs* with Christological and Mariological projections from an early date, as we will see in the following three sections. In Section 2 we will study the interpretations of some Greek Fathers; in Section 3 we will consider those of some Latin Fathers and theologians; finally, in Section 4 we will present many stanzas of Latin medieval liturgical hymns that develop this biblical metaphor in a Christological and Mariological sense.

2. The Metaphor *domus Sapientiae* in Greek Patristics

The Christological-Mariological interpretation of this sentence from *Proverbs* began relatively early within Eastern Christianity. Already in the first half of the third century, Saint Hippolytus Portuensis (c. 170–c. 235), Bishop of Portus, is, as far as we know, the Christian thinker who inaugurated in the Greek-Eastern Churches the exegetical variant

that deciphers the house built for herself by divine Wisdom (*domus Sapientiae*) as a symbol of Christ's human body, conceived in Mary's virginal womb. Hippolytus assures that Christ, who is God the Father's wisdom and power, built his human flesh as a house from that of the Virgin Mary. This is confirmed by the statement of the Creed, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us", and the sentence from *Proverbs*, "Wisdom has built her house". This fact —Hippolytus emphasizes— happened when Christ clothed himself with the human body engendered by his mother without needing a manly involvement.[2]

Some years later the scholar and ascetic Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 254) also interpreted this phrase from *Proverbs* as a metaphor for the incarnation of God the Son in Mary's womb, in the sense that the temple of the body (the human nature) of Christ was built by God by himself and for himself in the Virgin without human intervention. The Alexandrian writer adds that Daniel also predicted this when he stated that a stone not cut by hands grew and became a great mountain; thus, the body of Christ was made without human help.[3] With such statements, Origen clearly defends the supernatural human conception/incarnation of God the Son in the unpolluted womb of the Virgin Mary, as well as her virginal divine motherhood.

Some decades later, the Greek bishop Saint Gregory the Thaumaturge (c. 213–c. 270) offers a Mariological interpretation of this biblical metaphor. According to him, the Virgin Mary is the *domus Dei*, the home where God the Son incarnate lived, asserting that Gabriel was sent to Mary, palace of the king of angels, to prepare a most pure bed worthy of the divine Spouse.[4] In this regard, the author praises Mary with this warm greeting: "God save you, equivalent and worthy abode of heaven and earth. Hail, receptacle capable of perfectly containing the nature of the one which cannot be understood or contained",[5] due to his incomprehensible infinity. Thus, Gregory the Thaumaturge is, as far as we know, the first Greek-Eastern Church Father who defends the exclusively Mariological variant when interpreting the biblical metaphors we are studying. Despite that, the Thaumaturge also subscribes to Origen's dogmatic position on Christ's supernatural incarnation and Mary's virginal divine motherhood.

Towards the middle of the fourth century, the hymnographer Saint Ephrem of Syria (c. 307–373) confirms the exegetical variant that interprets the metaphors *domus Sapientiae* and *aula regalis* as symbolic figures of the Virgin Mary, in whose womb God the Son built his house to reside in. In Hymn 12 of the Nativity of Christ, Ephrem proclaims that Mary's womb was Christ's royal palace, whom he supernaturally conceived and gestated without losing her virginity. In his Hymn 17 for the same feast, the Syrian poet insists on similar concepts, pointing out in dialogue with Christ that Mary is the royal palace for Him, Son of the divine King, and the Sancta Sanctorum for Him, the divine Great priest.[6]

Some decades later, Saint Gregory Nyssen, Bishop of Nyssa in Cappadocia (c. 330/35–c. 394/400), inaugurated in the Greek-Eastern Churches the double exegetical variant when interpreting the metaphors *domus Sapientiae*, *aula regalis*, *palatium Dei*, *thronus deitatis*, and other similar analogies referring to spaces or elements for the exclusive use of God or the king. In his opinion, such metaphors simultaneously symbolize Mary (her virginal womb) and the body or human nature that God the Son took from the Virgin's womb.[7] In this sense, the Nyssen points out that when the Holy Spirit came to the Virgin and the power of the Most High covered her to beget the new man Christ, she became the house of God, built by God, and not by the hand of man. Thus, the author confirms the Mariological projection of his exegesis. However, he then completes his interpretation, expanding it to the Christological projection, by arguing that, since God does not live in buildings built by man, divine Wisdom, making her house, entered it, so that the divine nature of God the Son would be united with the human nature in his body and soul.[8]

Furthermore, in a writing against Eunomius, the Nyssen insists that the phrase from *Proverbs* "Wisdom has built her house" is a symbolic way of signifying God the Son's incarnation in Mary's womb, since true Wisdom, God the Son, does not live in a strange building: that is why he built his house (his body or human nature) from Mary's virginal body.[9] Thus, for Gregory the Nyssen, this *domus Sapientiae* symbolizes both God the Son's human body and the Virgin Mary, in whose virginal womb Christ was conceived as a man.

Almost half a century later, Saint Cyril of Alexandria (c. 370/73–444) reiterates these two interpretative variants by declaring that the *Proverbs* saying "Wisdom has built her house," and Gabriel's announcement that the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary and the power of the Almighty would overshadow her mean that in Christ the godhead of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit do not operate separately but as a single whole, so that Christ's human incarnation is the joint work of the Trinity's entire divine nature.[10] In another passage of this writing, Cyril reiterates that, when "Wisdom has built her house" and a truer tabernacle (the corporeal temple built from Mary), the divine Word, which is in God the Father's bosom, descended within her and became a man.[11]

Around the same time, Saint Proclus of Constantinople († 446/48) and Hesychius of Jerusalem († *post* 450) subscribe to the Mariological interpretation of the *domus Sapientiae* as a symbolic reference exclusively to Mary. Thus, Proclus, in a sermon in honor of the Virgin, dedicates some warm praise to her, such as "glory of virgins", "joy of mothers", "sustenance of the faithful", and "diadem of the Church". It is interesting to note that among these praises, the "domicile of the Holy Trinity" stands out, an honor that, according to Proclus, derives from Gabriel's announcement to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow; so the Holy One who will be born of you will be called the Son of God."[12]

For his part, Hesychius of Jerusalem takes up in a sermon in honor of Mary the various praises that other Fathers dedicate to her. According to Hesychius, some call her the mother of light, another calls her the star of life, another calls her the throne of God, another calls her a temple grander than heaven, another considers her a chair higher than that of the cherubs, and another calls her a fertile garden without having been planted or cultivated.[13]

Towards the middle of the fifth century, Theodotus of Ancyra asserts in a homily on the Virgin and the Nativity of Christ that God the Son, without turning away from God the Father, descended to the Earth and made the fullness of divinity, which cannot be contained anywhere, fit in the womb of the Virgin. In addition, being the splendor of glory and the figure of the hidden substance of God the Father, he wanted to assume the human flesh of the immaculate Virgin. Furthermore, he who was begotten by God the Father in eternity, chose for himself a mother in new times, and divine Wisdom built for herself in the womb of the Virgin a temple not made with human hands, and dwelt among us.[14]

Almost half a century later, the famous Syriac hymn composer Jacob of Serugh (c. 451–521) adopts the restricted Mariological interpretation when, in a sermon on the Visitation, he says that Christ is holy and Mary is the house of holiness, whose closed door indicates that she always kept the seals of her virginity intact.[15] In another sermon, Jacob of Serugh describes Mary as "a shining citadel, into which the King once entered, lived after building it, and was never opened before he came out of it."[16]

A few years later, the Neoplatonic philosopher Procopius of Gaza (c. 465–528), writing on the *Exodus*, affirms that Christ, whom we consider a temple, born of Mary, enriched his home with his divine nature, thus improving the Holy Virgin.[17] Perhaps around the same time, John Maxentius, monk of Antioch (first half of the sixth century), affirms that the Word, Son of God, consubstantial with God the Father and born of Him in eternity, without losing his divine nature, became man in time with a rational soul and a human body in the Virgin Mary's womb without human semen, so that he came out of a virginal thalamus.[18]

A few lines later, Maxentius explains that the Word of God was united to the human nature generated from the Virgin's entrails, since Wisdom built her house in her, in such a way that the Word of God was inserted into the human flesh and soul in the Virgin's womb through a supernatural union.[19]

A decade or two later, Leontius of Byzantium (c. 485–c. 543) expressed in a treatise against the Arians that the orthodox faith affirms that God the Father begot the divine Word from eternity in an immutable, perfect, indivisible, substantial, and complete union with Him. Then the Word of God was conceived in time as a man by the work of the Holy Spirit supernaturally, without intercourse, in Mary's womb.[20] Leontius assures that neither by his first divine generation in eternity nor by his second human generation in time, the incarnate Word of God has anything in common with other men.[21] The author emphasizes this essential difference by specifying that no being was generated eternal, immutable, undivided, and perfect such as God the Son, who was born in his first generation in eternity;[22] nor was any being born without semen or corruption, conceived supernaturally by the Holy Spirit, as was the Word of God incarnate in his second generation. Thus God the Son, conceived perfect without time (in eternity), was formed and endowed with human members in the Virgin Mary's chaste womb, taking from her only a perfect human body adapted to himself, as a temple and tabernacle of the divine Word.[23] With such expressions, Leontius of Byzantium, in addition to accepting the double interpretation, Mariological and Christological, of the biblical metaphors under analysis, also subscribes to the already consolidated dogma of Christ's double nature, divine and human (duophysitism), both substantially united in one single Person.

Therefore, Leontius assures that we cannot stop praising this Virgin, increasingly recognized as Mother of God, in whom and from whom the incarnate Word of God comes out as a bridegroom leaving his nuptial chamber, and through whom Wisdom (God the Son) built her house (his body).[24] Leontius adds that what is admirable in this case is that Wisdom built and assumed her house (the human body) from Mary's womb not due to natural conditions, but because of her supernatural divine nature, i.e., that of the Word of God who dwells in Mary: the divine Word supernaturally built his house (his body and nature as a man), engendered by this woman through whose inviolate vulva He entered (when being conceived) and left (at birth).[25] Leontius concludes by arguing that, because of his infinite goodness, the Word of God, who was entirely spiritual, divinely provided for himself a corporeal form in the womb of Mary, thus intimately linking his divine nature with the human body he took from the Virgin.[26]

Almost a century later, Saint Modestos, bishop of Jerusalem († 634), reinterprets the biblical metaphor *domus Sapientiae* according to the restricted Mariological projection, stating that God turned Mary into the house and habitation of God the Son, who lived in her without restrictions, was incarnated in her by the work of the Holy Spirit, and, made a child, the one who is God inseparable from His Father and the Holy Spirit, remained nine months in Mary's womb.[27]

A century later, Saint Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (c. 650/60–c. 730/33), also seems to adhere to this strictly Mariological interpretation of the biblical metaphors above. Thus, in a sermon on Mary's Presentation, he exalts her as the sacrosanctly built, immaculate, purest palace of God, the supreme King, adorned with his magnificence.[28] Mary—the author goes on— is now the royal palace of God and his holy temple, not made by human hands and resplendent with beauty, in which the divine Word was incarnated to reconcile humankind with God the Father.[29] Germanus then praises the Virgin with various metaphorical praises, such as "holy throne of God, divine altar, house of glory, charming ornament," and "mercy seat of the entire world, which sings to heaven and the glory of God."[30]

In another sermon on the Dormition of Mary, Germanus assures that the biblical sentence "You are beautiful" refers to the Virgin, because her body is virginal, completely chaste, and holy, "the perfect and complete house of God."[31] In a hymn in honor of Mary, Saint Germanus praises her with these metaphors referring to spaces or elements reserved for God or the King:

> Golden candlestick,
> Cloud that illuminates,
> Higher than the cherubs,
> living ark,
> Beautiful throne of the Most High,
> Golden urn that receives manna,
> vital table of the Word,
> Refuge of all Christians,
> That celebrate [you] with a sacred poem,
> Let's say this: Palace of the Word [...].[32]

Some years later, Saint Andrew of Crete, Saint John Damascene, and Saint John of Euboea expressed similar exclusively Mariological interpretations. Saint Andrew of Crete or Jerusalem, bishop of Gortyn in Crete (c. 660–c. 740), declares in his fourth sermon on the Annunciation that Holy Scripture honored the Virgin Mary with many metaphors: among them are "conjugal room, house of God, holy temple, tabernacle, holy table, altar, mercy seat, golden censer, Sancta Sanctorum", and other symbols, through which the interpreters of the Scriptures prophetically designate Mary.[33] In his fifth sermon on the Annunciation, the Cretan theologian exalts the Virgin, calling her "magnificent temple of divine glory", "palace of the King of sacred construction", "marital room in which Christ married human nature with the divine.[34]

On the other hand, the prestigious Syrian Father Saint John Damascene (675–749), in his first sermon on Mary's birth, praises her because her womb is the home of the one (God the Son) who does not fit anywhere, and because she is entirely the bridal chamber of the Holy Spirit, the complete city of the living God, animated by the emanation of the Holy Spirit's graces.[35] In another passage, the author exalts the Virgin, saying that there is no other home for God more worthy than her; therefore, all generations appreciate her holiness, for being the distinguished honor of humankind, the glory of the priests, the hope of Christians, and the fertile plant of virginity.[36]

In a second sermon on this same Marian event, John Damascene exalts Mary as the ark and refuge built by God, the receptacle of the new world, from which Christ, as a new Noah, emerged (at being conceived and at birth), filling the supreme world of incorruption.[37] A few lines later, he exalts the Virgin in these terms: "Hail, house of God, resplendent with divine splendors, [...] house full of the glory of the Lord, and whose spirit shines more than the seraphim of fire."[38]

Then, John Damascene exalts Mary with this sequence of poetic praises:

> God save you, heaven, the noblest and cleanest abode in the whole world, which shines with the splendor of virtues as if they were stars: from where the Sun of justice was born [...]. Hail, throne elevated to the sublimity of glory, living seat, manifesting the seat of God in itself.[39]

A few lines later, he goes on to express:

> God save you, Mother, the only one who knows no man, the only one intact among mothers [...]. God save you, Virgin who generates, the only one who gives birth among virgins, preserving the attributes of virginity among mothers, a surprising prodigy before the other [mothers].[40]

Perhaps during the same years, Saint John of Euboea (eighth century) assures in a sermon on Mary's Conception that the heavenly king builds a palace without human hands, and—in reference to Ezekiel's *porta clausa*—this palace has a gate facing East, and no one will enter through it, but only the Lord God, and it will be a closed gate.[41] The author then adds:

> It is a perfectly admirable Palace because even the angelic Virtues themselves admire it, and it is a work that surpasses all thought. For this Palace, built without the intervention of any human architect, appears more sublime than heaven and broader than any creature, and no one lived in it except this architect, maker, and Creator of all heavenly and earthly things.[42]

In another paragraph of this sermon, John of Euboea insists that Mary is the house that, with the blessing of God the Father and the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, Christ had built to inhabit in his incarnation when the time to come to save us was fulfilled.[43]

Around the same time, Cosmas of Maiuma (c. 675/706–c. 760) says in a hymn that the infinite wisdom of God the Son built her house (body) of her most chaste mother, the Virgin Mary, so that Christ, our God, clothed himself in the temple of his body.[44]

Towards the middle of the ninth century, the Byzantine monk Saint Joseph the Hymnographer († 883) adopts the exclusively Mariological interpretation of the metaphors at hand. In several hymns in honor of Mary, he praises her with multiple poetic expressions analogous to the metaphorical figures mentioned above. Thus, in one of them he states on the Virgin: "You have been made a temple and palace of the King, in which the supersubstantial Being, making it his abode, also converts the faithful into the domicile of the Holy Trinity."[45]

In another Marian poem, Joseph the Hymnographer expresses that the faithful recognize Mary as "the urn and manna of divinity," "the ark [of the Covenant] and the altar," "the candelabra and the throne of God," and "the palace and the bridge that leads to divine life those who sing songs to you."[46] In another ode, the Byzantine poet praises the Virgin as the fiery throne that carries the Creator to the animated bridal bedchamber and as the joyful palace that contains the King who became like us. In another canticle, the Hymnographer exalts Mary because God made her the throne of fire and the living palace of the King (Christ), who, after residing there, redeemed all human beings from original sin.[47] In another paragraph of this hymn, he assures that all nations praise the Virgin, designating her as the golden urn, the candelabra, the table and the staff, the holy mountain and the cloud, the King's palace and the flaming throne, for being the mother of God, who remained a virgin after childbirth.[48]

At the end of this tour of the main Greek-Eastern sources of Christian doctrine, we find that for about seven hundred years (third-nineth centuries), all the Church Fathers analyzed in this section manifest a substantial exegetical agreement on the biblical metaphors above. Regardless of whether they emphasize the Mariological or the Christological meanings, they all agree in defending that the various symbolic terms referred to—*domus Sapientiae*, *palatium Dei*, *aula regalis*, *domicilium Trinitatis*, *thronus deitatis*, and other similar metaphors—mean Mary's virginal womb in which God the Son was supernaturally incarnated as a man, or they symbolize the body or human nature that God the Son assumed from Mary's virginal entrails. In any case, such symbolic expressions essentially allude to two complementary dogmas: the first, that of the supernatural conception/incarnation of God the Son in Mary's virginal womb; the second, and because of the first, that of Mary's virginal divine motherhood. In this way, the interpretations of those Greek-Eastern Church Fathers, who for so many centuries substantially agreed on the interpretive approach to these metaphorical expressions, built a solid and unanimous doctrinal tradition on the two dogmas above.

Furthermore, those exegetical-dogmatic conclusions reached by the Greek-Eastern Fathers analyzed here are the same ones offered by the Fathers and theologians of the Latin Church during the long millennium that elapsed between the fourth and fifteenth centuries, as we will see in the next Section 3.

3. The Metaphor *domus Sapientiae* According to Latin Church Fathers and Theologians

In the second half of the fourth century, the prestigious master St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (c. 339/40–397), decisively welcomed both the Christological and Mariological interpretations of the *domus Sapientiae* as a double, simultaneous symbol of Christ's human body and Mary's virginal uterus. Initially, Ambrose exclusively privileged the Mariological interpretation. He asserts in his treatise on virginity that, when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, he entered through the closed gate of Mary's virginity and dwelt in her as the King dwelling in the royal palace (*aula regia*) of Mary's virginal womb. According to the author, this royal palace is the Virgin Mary, since she is not subject to any human male, but only to God.[49]

Furthermore, Ambrose retakes in his 63rd Epistle this Mariological projection, when considering how great was the grace of Mary's virginity, who merited to be elected by Jesus Christ to become God's bodily temple, in which divinity in full dwelt. That way the Virgin became the Savior of the world, and at the same time, remaining a virgin, gave birth to the life of every human being.[50]

Ambrose strengthens his Mariological interpretation in a couple of hymns in honor of the Virgin. In the first one, he refers to Christ's conception/birth from Mary's uterus through these poetic expressions:

The Giant of two twin substances,	Procedens de thalamo suo
Coming out from his conjugal bedroom,	Pudoris aula regia,
The royal palace of chastity,	Geminae Gigas substantiae,
to run the road quickly.	Alacris ut currat viam.[51]

In another Marian hymn, Ambrose alludes to Christ's conception/birth from Mary's virginal uterus in this stanza:

The offspring of supreme light	Genus superni luminis,
Was born from the Virgin's royal palace,	processit aula virginis,
Husband, Redeemer, Founder,	Sponsus, redemptor, conditor,
Giant of his Church.	Suae gigas Ecclesiae.[52]

Nevertheless, in a second instance, Ambrose plainly subscribes the double Mariological and Christological interpretation of the analogous metaphors *domus Sapientiae*, *templum Dei*, *aula regia*, and *palatium*. In his 30th Epistle, he states that when Christ decided to find a temple where to live for redeeming humankind, he did not search stones or wood worked with human hands, but instead chose the Virgin Mary's uterus to build it as *aula regia* and *templum* where the heavenly King could live, so that the human body generated from Mary would become the temple of God, which would resurrect three days after its death.[53] Therefore, for St. Ambrose, these building metaphors—*domus*, *palatium*, *aula*, *templum*—mean simultaneously Mary's virginal womb and Christ's human body.

Two or three decades after St. Ambrose expressed such concepts, St. Jerome of Stridon (c. 347–420) subscribed to the Mariological variant, assuring in a comment to Isaiah that the Lord of the virtues and King of glory will descend into a virginal womb and, as Ezekiel predicted, will enter and exit through the eastern door, which is always closed. This stands according to the announcement of Gabriel to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; so the holy one to be born will be

called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35), and according to the sentence in *Proverbs*: "Wisdom has built her house".[54]

Around the same period in which St. Jerome did so, St. Maximus, bishop of Turin († c. 420), joined those who supported the Mariological interpretation of the biblical metaphors under scrutiny, proclaiming Mary as a worthy abode for Christ, not according to the laws of physical nature, but by the original grace of the Holy Spirit. The Virgin—the author asserts—mysteriously carried, as in her womb's tabernacle, the priest, Christ God, priest and host, God of the resurrection, and priest of the oblation.[55] A few lines later, Maximus goes on to say that instead of the womb, he prefers to call Mary's womb a temple since it is the temple in which all the holy things existing in heaven (Christ) dwell more valuable even than heaven, almost as if the divine mystery were installed in the most secret tabernacle.[56] Likewise, in his Treatise 5 against the Jews, Maximus insists on affirming that Christ is the Word of God and the power and wisdom of God the Father, whom he sent to save humankind.[57]

Not many years later, St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) opted for the Christological interpretation of the metaphors above, considering that this *domus Dei* or *domus Sapientiae* signifies the body or human nature of God the Son incarnate. Augustine interprets the *Proverbs*' sentence "Wisdom has built her house" in the sense that we recognize that the divine Wisdom, that is, the Word of God, coeternal with the Father, built for herself in Mary's womb the temple of Christ's body or human nature, a body to which he would later unite the Church, as the members are united to the head.[58]

Perhaps by the same decades, Arnobius Junior († *post* 455), in a comment to the *Psalms*, after affirming that every pure person will enter the Lord's tabernacle and there will be purified, assures that the immaculate Jesus, the only one who entered Mary's virginal palace (*aula*), freed her from the carnal stains and gave her much higher sanctification than he received from her.[59] In another dogmatic treatise, Arnobius assures that God, who made the first man from the clay of the earth, manufactured by his omnipotence in the Virgin's womb a human body in which to dwell, according to what we read in *Proverbs:* "Wisdom has built her house."[60]

Towards the end of the fifth century or in the first decades of the sixth, St. Eleutherius of Tournai (c. 456–531) says in a sermon on Christ's incarnation that entering the Holy Spirit in Mary's royal palace of modesty (her womb) made her give birth to Christ, God the Son made man. So, he would redeem the sins of all people by shedding his innocent blood for humankind's redemption, also making the invisible God appear visible before people through his visible only-begotten Son made man.[61]

Around the same years, Saint Fulgentius of Ruspe (460–533), speaking in a book to Thrasymond about the substantial union of Christ's two natures, divine and human, writes:

> For neither a part of him [God the Son] remained in the Father nor a part of him descended to the Virgin, but he remained in the Father all that he was [God], and [remained] in the Virgin in all that he was not [man]: filling everything and containing the world, being a whole like God the Father, and building as a whole a house for himself in the Virgin's womb—for it is written: "Wisdom has built her house" (Prov. IX,1)—, [Christ] is a whole in the everlasting Father, and a whole in the received man [human nature], a whole in heaven, and a whole on earth.[62]

In other passages of this book, Fulgentius insists on the idea that, through God the Father, God the Son, divine wisdom built for herself a house, that is, a human nature, in the Virgin's womb;[63] and that Christ's human body is designated by Holy Scripture as a house, according to *Proverbs*, and as a temple, according to the Gospel of John.[64]

About three generations later, St. Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers (c. 530–c. 607/609), praises the Virgin Mary in a poem through these metaphorical concepts:

Royal palace (*aula*) of God, ornament of paradise, glory of the kingdom; Shelter of life, bridge that penetrates heaven. Glowing ark and mighty scabbard of a doubly sharp sword, For the ascendant of God, high beacon of light.	Aula Dei, ornatus paradisi, gloria regni; hospitium vitae, pons penetrando polos. Arca nitens et theca potens gladii bis acuti, ara Dei adsurgens, luminis alta pharos.[65]

Approximately a generation later, Saint Isidore, bishop of Seville (c. 556/60–636), assures that in *Proverbs* the double nature of God the Son, Christ, is prophesied: the divine is prophesied when he says that "The abysses did not yet exist, and I had already been conceived" and the human one is prophesied when he says that "Wisdom has built her house," which is the temple of her human body in which the Son of God would dwell while the Word became flesh.[66]

Some decades later, St. Ildefonsus, archbishop of Toledo (607–667), in a book on Mary's virginity written against three infidels, criticizes Helvidius for daring to defame Mary's virginity in begetting Jesus.[67] Moreover, he asks rhetorically Helvidius not to oppose this majesty's power, so as not to diminish God's property with his reckless daring nor to damage with his presumption the godhead's mansion, and not to collapse the Lord's house with insults of corruption, and let it not pretend to affirm that the door of God's house, closed after He passed, can be passed through by anyone.[68]

Ildefonsus goes on to say that the God of virtues is the Lord of this possession, that the King of Heaven is the owner of this property, and Almighty God is the builder of this house, the only one who enters it, and the custodian of the door through which he entered.[69] The saint prelate of Toledo also emphasizes that, when entering this house (when being conceived as a man), God the Son did not remove the seals of his mother's virginity, and when leaving it (at birth), he enriched Mary with integrity (perpetual virginity).[70] In another sermon on the Virgin's assumption attributed to him,[71] St. Ildefonsus describes Mary as a "Good house" into which the Deity of the Word enters, sliding into the house in which the wisdom of God, Christ, erected for himself seven columns, which sustain the whole house, and that way He constructed the Church.[72]

Some three generations later, Bede the Venerable (c. 673–735) briefly takes up the *Proverbs* sentence above to say that Christ, through his divine power, founded for himself a human substance, which he assumed at birth from the Virgin Mary.[73]

Towards the middle of the ninth century, the Benedictine monk Ratramnus of Corbie (c. 800–c. 870) states in a book on the Nativity of Jesus that Mary's virginity before childbirth, in childbirth, and after childbirth can be affirmed since "the royal palace of her modesty" (the vulva) remained inviolate; therefore, when recognizing the truth of Christ's birth, we acknowledge the reality of the birth of his mother, Mary.[74] Because—Ratramnus asks rhetorically—what else does it mean that Mary is a virgin before childbirth but that her virginity was fertilized? And what else does it mean that Mary is a virgin in childbirth but that she gave birth being a virgin? And what else does it mean that Mary is a virgin after childbirth, but that she kept her virginity perpetually?[75]

Some two centuries later, Bruno of Würzburg, also known as Bruno of Carinthia (c. 1005–1045), cites the well-known sentence from *Proverbs*, asserting that God the Son was born into this world from the substance of his mother as a complete man, with body and soul, in everything like us, except in sin; and he was born of the substance of her mother, in

every way equal to her human nature, for, according to the *Proverbs* saying above, Christ built for himself the human flesh (body) of the blessed Mary.[76]

By these same decades, the Benedictine monk St. Peter Damian, bishop of Ostia (1007–1072), sets in a sermon for the Nativity of Mary this assertion: as it was impossible for the redemption of humanity if Christ had not been born of the Virgin, it was necessary for the Virgin to be born, in whom the Word of God would be incarnated. Therefore, it was convenient for the King of heaven to build a house first—as Solomon said when pointing out that "Wisdom has built her house"—in which he wanted to have his lodging when he descended to earth. Mary is a house that the eternal Wisdom, Christ, has built in such a way that it was worthy to receive him and to procreate him from the womb of her immaculate flesh.[77]

Later, in a series of lyrical poems in honor of the Virgin, Peter Damian reiterates some similar ideas. Thus, in one of them, he exclaims:

Beautiful royal palace of the heavenly King,	Aula caelestis speciosa Regis,
Supported by the seven columns of wisdom:	Fulta septenis sophiae columnas:
You lock up in your belly	Quem nequit totus cohibere mundus
Whom the entire universe cannot contain.	Claudis in alvo.[78]

In a new Marian canticle, the Italian poet expresses:

Mary as the splendid honor of humankind,	Maria, decus hominum,
the Throne of the Eternal King,	Regis aeterni solium,
the House [built] by Wisdom	Septem columnis edita
based on seven columns.	Domus a Sapientia.[79]

In another ode, Peter Damian praises the Virgin in these metaphorical terms:

You are the closed door of the temple,	Tu porta templi clausa,
The Palace of the Supreme King:	Superni Regis aula:
The Treasury of wealth	Aerarium talenti,
For which we are redeemed.	Per quod sumus redempti.[80]

In the umpteenth poem, Peter Damian proclaims:

The whole Trinity, God the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit,	Tecum tota Trinitas fecit mansionem,
Made in you its mansion and fixed its seat;	Pater, Verbum, Spiritus fixit sessionem;
So now you offer yourself more abondantly,	Propter quod nunc largius ad devotionem
As a lesson for the devotion of the faithful.	Teipsam fidelibus praebes lectionem.[81]

In the same way, Peter Damian, in a sermon on the birth of Mary, reiterates that eternal wisdom built in the Virgin a house that was worthy of receiving her and procreating her as a man from her inviolate womb.[82] In another writing, he insists on the idea that divine wisdom built Mary as her own house, and she rested in her as in a most sacred bed through the mystery of assumed humility.[83]

One generation later, the Italian Benedictine St. Anselm, bishop of Canterbury (1033–1109), in a prayer in honor of the Virgin, addresses her in search of protection, calling her "the Royal Palace of Universal Propitiation, the cause of general reconciliation, a vessel, and the temple of life and salvation for all".[84] Then, after extolling Mary, calling her "an admirable Lady for her unique virginity, kind for her healthy fertility, venerable for her inestimable holiness," he asserts that she showed God to the world, which did not

know him; she made her Creator visible to the world, which did not see him; and she begot and gave birth to the reconciler that sinners needed.[85]

In another sermon in honor of Mary, Anselm exclaims, "Oh, blessed Mother of God, Virgin Mary, the temple of the living God, the palace of the eternal King, the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit!"[86] Then, in a series of hymns of a Psalter composed in honor of the Virgin, Anselm repeatedly praises her with some poetic compliments related to God's house, as when saying:

Hail, mother of the advocate [Jesus],	Ave, mater advocati,
Who, happy with his advice,	Qui beatus consilio,
Left the royal palace of the virgin womb,	Aula ventris incorrupti
As if coming out of a bridal bedroom.	Processit ut ex thalamo.[87]

Some verses later, he insists, proclaiming:

Hail, singular Virgin,	Ave, Virgo singularis,
Rewarding virginal palace,	Placens aula virginalis,
In whose temple the Lord stands	Cujus in templo Dominus
Who is also based in heaven.	Et in coelo sedes ejus.[88]

After several stanzas, he goes on to assert:

Hail, the entrance of heaven,	Ave, coeli introitus,
Divine room	Divina habitatio,
Of the one who is to us son,	Cujus est nobis filius
Brother and redemption.	Et frater, et redemption.[89]

Shortly afterward, he stresses:

Hail, heavenly mansion,	Ave, coelestis mansio,
Through whose temple,	De cujus templi medio,
We receive the incarnate	Suscepimus incarnatam
The mercy of God.	Dei misericordiam.[90]

Around the same period, Saint Yvo, bishop of Chartres (1040–1115), adopted the idea that Christ, the power and wisdom of God, built for himself a house in the Virgin Mary's womb.[91] Some decades later, the Benedictine Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075–1129) reiterated in a treatise on the Trinity the usual interpretation of the *Proverbs* statement above, asserting that the Holy Spirit built wisely, decently adorned, and gloriously and happily dedicated this house not made by human hands as the temple of the Lord (Christ): he built it in the divine Word's incarnation, he adorned it in his manifestation as a true man, and he dedicated it in his sacrosanct resurrection.[92] In another commentary on the prophet Joel, Rupert of Deutz partially insists on similar concepts, stating that the "factory" of the body of Christ is the house that wisdom built for her.[93]

Around the same years, the Benedictine abbot Geoffrey of Vendôme (c. 1070–1132), in a sermon on the Nativity of Jesus, reiterates that the Virgin Mary, worthy of God, is called "house of the Lord," whose eastern door was always closed; and very accurately, Mary is called by the name of the house, that is, the temple of God, because God himself dwelt in her both for the sanctification of the Holy Spirit and for human conception.[94] Therefore—the abbot of Vendôme goes on to say—preserving the property of his divine nature, God the Son became flesh in the Virgin's womb and, after becoming a true man in body and soul, was born of a virgin mother, leaving for the temple's eastern door, which neither suffered in its integrity by him nor was opened by any other man.[95]

In another Marian sermon, Geoffrey of Vendôme confirms that God the Father sent his Only-Begotten Son to the Virgin Mary so that he would become her son and husband at

the same time.[96] God the Father arranged it by his charity, God the Son perfected it by his will, and the Holy Spirit prepared and decorated the nuptial bedroom, cleaning the womb of the Virgin from all corruption of sin and filling it with multiple sanctities. Therefore, God, who had previously created all things, created in Mary his royal palace.[97]

A couple of decades later St. Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux (1090–1153), joined the legion of theologians who interpreted the *Proverbs* sentence above according to the Mariological and Christological projections already explained. Thus, in a sermon in praise of the Virgin Mary, Bernard says that dwelling in Mary was a good pleasure from God when the wisdom of God built her house from the unpolluted substance of her flesh.[98] In another sermon on the Annunciation, Saint Bernard assures that, according to *Proverbs*, divine wisdom built her house in the Virgin Mary, and she (Wisdom) prepared for herself a throne in her and from her (Mary), and she (Wisdom) adapted for her a perfect and convenient body in her and from her (Mary), so that this house would serve her (Wisdom) to rest, and this throne would serve her to judge, so that it would serve her as a tabernacle to fight and as a chair to teach.[99]

Some years later, canon Gerhoh of Reichersberg (1093–1169), in a commentary on *Psalms*, rhetorically putting himself in the role of God the Son, affirms that He is the eternal wisdom of God, in which eternal and paternal omnipotence is combined with his kindness, which is the Holy Spirit.[100] So the temple of the body of God the Son is the temple of the entire Trinity, for, as the Gospel of John says, whoever sees me also sees the Father, and in the same way sees the Holy Spirit. Gerhoh goes on to express that, although divine wisdom built a house not made with human hands only for herself, and not for the Father or the Holy Spirit, since only divine wisdom was incarnated, however, as we believe that eternal power (God the Father) and eternal goodness (the Holy Spirit) are consubstantial with divine wisdom (God the Son), that is why the divine Word inhabits the temple of his human body through his incarnation, while God the Father and the Holy Spirit dwell in him through their full godhead.[101]

In parallel, canon Garnerius of St. Victor († 1170) states that the house built by wisdom for herself, according to *Proverbs*, designates the body of Christ. For wisdom built her house when the only begotten Son of God created for himself a human body through the soul in the womb of the Virgin Mary; therefore, the body of the only begotten is called the house and temple of God, but in such a way that it is the one and only and the same Son of God and man who dwells and is dwelt in that house.[102]

Several years later, the Premonstratensian canon Philip of Harveng (1110–1183) ensures that, in the incarnation of God the Son, there is no contradiction between the action of the divine Word and that of the Holy Spirit, since *Proverbs* affirms that wisdom has built her house, that is, God the Son built his house, and the Gospel of Matthew says that what was born in Mary comes from the Holy Spirit. Around those same years, Peter of Celle, bishop of Chartres (c. 1115–1183), states in a sermon on Advent that Mary is "the palace built with wonderful efforts, but enriched with incomparable treasures, enriched only for God and for God the Son."[103]

A couple of decades later, the diplomat and poet Peter of Blois (c. 1135–c. 1203) states in a sermon on Mary's birth that for her strength she is the city founded by the Most High; for the integrity of her virginity, she is the closed garden, the sealed fountain, the closed door, the uncut [cedar of] Lebanon; for her holiness, she is the temple of God, the door of the sanctuary, the ark of God, the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit; for her glory, she is the King's palace, the cell of scents, the source of the orchards, the paradise of delights.[104] A few lines later, Peter of Blois goes on to say that the wisdom of which we speak when we say that "Wisdom has built her house" is Christ, power, and wisdom of God, because

Christ chose the womb of Mary as his shelter, and she, Mary, is "the house of the modest breast," "the house of God and the door of heaven".[105]

A generation later, the Cistercian poet Helinand of Froidmont (c. 1150–c. 1229/37) interpreted the *Proverbs* sentence above with the usual Mariological and Christological projections. Thus, in a Palm Day sermon, he states that Christ, conceived of the Holy Spirit and Mary, came into an undefiled body in which wisdom built a house for herself.[106] In addition, in another homily on the assumption Helinand says that Mary was predestined from eternity to be the wife of God the Father and to have a son with him, and thus to be the mother of God the Son, the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit, the temple of all the Trinity and Wisdom's own house, according to *Proverbs* saying "Wisdom has built her house."[107]

About half a century later, the prestigious Franciscan master St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217/21–1274), known as the Seraphic Doctor, assures in a sermon on the assumption that the entire divine Trinity, with favorable influence, with great joy, and with the glory of divinity, knew Mary (in the sense of maintaining a symbolic marital relationship with her) as a wife of chaste love, a palace of holy cohabitation, and a factory of admirable operation, for which we must explicitly say that God the Father knew the blessed Mary as the house of his royal majesty.[108]

At the conclusion of this exploration of the main doctrinal sources of the Greek-Eastern and Latin Churches, we remark that for more than a millennium (third–13th centuries), all the Eastern and Western Fathers and theologians analyzed in this article manifest a substantial exegetical agreement on the *domus Sapientiae* metaphor and other similar metaphorical expressions, such as *templum Dei* or *aula regis*.

Now, regardless of whether one or another of the masters studied here emphasizes the Mariological or Christological sense separately, or both at the same time, they all agree in defending that the various symbolic terms referred to—*domus Sapientiae*, *templum Dei*, *aula regalis*, *domicilium Trinitatis*, *thronus deitatis*, and other analogous metaphors—signify Mary's virginal womb in which God the Son was supernaturally incarnated as a man, or they symbolize the body or human nature that God the Son assumed from Mary's virginal entrails.

In any case, for all those Fathers and theologians, such symbolic expressions essentially allude to two complementary dogmas: first, that of God the Son's supernatural human conception/incarnation in the Virgin Mary's womb; second, and because of the first, that of Mary's virginal divine motherhood. In this way, the interpretations of those Greek-Eastern and Latin Fathers and theologians, who for eleven centuries substantially agreed on the interpretative approach to these metaphorical expressions, built a unanimous doctrinal tradition on the two dogmas mentioned above.

As we will see in the following Section 4, this doctrinal tradition will inspire numerous medieval hymnographers, who throughout the Middle Ages will produce countless poems and liturgical hymns, many of whose stanzas will lyrically take up the metaphors above.

4. The *domus Sapientiae* Metaphor and Other Similar Symbolic Figures in Medieval Latin Liturgical Hymns

Logically, among the liturgical hymns we have analyzed in this article, we will present here only the stanzas that allude to the biblical metaphors under analysis. To better gauge the evolution of the hymnographers' exegeses on the matter, we will present these fragments of hymns in strict chronological order, grouping them by century.

4.1. Tenth-Century Hymns

From this century we have documented on the topic only *Hymnus 575. De sancta Maria. hymni. Ad tertiam*, that imprecates the saving mediation of Mary, mother of the Supreme

Judge, with this stanza:

Mary, beauty of men.	Maria, decus hominum
throne of the eternal king	regis aeterni solium,
house built by Wisdom	septem columnis
with seven columns;	edita domus a sapientia;
Recommend us with your supplicating	Tu nos venturo judici
prayer to the Judge who will come,	commenda prece supplici,
concentrated on your praises	tuis intentos laudibus
so that he appears benign and placid.	mitis cernat ac placidus.[109]

4.2. Eleventh-Century Hymns

From the 11th century, we have registered only these two hymns:

Hymnus 68. In Assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis, it proclaims the merciful mediation of the mother of Christ with these lyrical praises:

2a. Seat of Wisdom,	2a. Sedes sapientiae,
Path of penance,	Via poenitentiae,
house of chastity	Domus pudicitiae,
Relief and comfort	Relevamen et solamen
For the miserable	Miseris et tristibus,
and medicine for sad, help	Medicamen, adjuvamen
for the repentant fallen	Lapsis poenitentibus.[110]

Some stanzas later, *Hymnus 68* continues its applause in those terms:

10a. Origin of clemency	10a. Origo clementiae,
Title of prudence.	Titulus prudentiae,
10b. mirror of justice	10b. Speculum justitiae,
[Seat of wisdom].	[Sedes sapientiae].
11a. Source of abundant virtue,	11a. Fons virtutis nimiae,
sweet and kind	Dulcis et diligenda,
11b. For whom the gate of glory	11b. Per quam porta gloriae
Should have been opened.	Fuit aperienda.[111]

Hymnus 16. In Nativitate Beatae Mariae Virginis. Ad Vesperas, from around the 11th century, refers to God the Son's virginal human conception/incarnation in Mary's womb in this stanza:

Wisdom has built	Domum sibi virgineam
A virginal house for herself.	Construxit sapientia.
Christ, the supreme cleansing,	Mundam quam mundus habitat,
Being clean dwells with her who is clean.	Christus, summa munditia.[112]

4.3. Twelfth-Century Hymns

From the twelfth century, we have found those three hymns:

Hymnus 143. De beata Maria Virgine exalts the mother of Christ with these symbolic figures:

Nourishing mother of the Word of God,	Verbi Dei parens alma,
Virgin full of grace	Virgo plena gratia,
King's palace, sanctuary of the kings.	Aula regis, sancta regum
That adorns the palaces.	Adornans palatia.[113]

Hymnus 504. Psalterium Mariae sings Mary's virginal divine motherhood in these verses:

Hail, house closed to men,	Ave domus clausa viro,
open to God in a wonderful way,	Deo patens modo miro,
the holiness and length of the days	te dierum sanctitudo
are convenient for you.	decet atque longitudo.[114]

Hymnus 90. Jubilus de singulis membris Beatae Mariae Virginis, from around the 12th century, proclaims the Virgin Mary as mother of Christ, God, and man through these biblical figures:

Hail, virginal bridal bed	Salve, thorus virginalis,
fiery and royal chamber,	Cella flagrans et regalis,
Throne of Wisdom	Thronus sapientiae,
Solomon's blooming bed	Lectus florens Salomonis,
Gideon's wet fleece	Vellus madens Gedeonis,
bed of justice,	Thalamus justitiae,
which Christ	De quo Christus tamquam sponsus
left temporarily	Carne tectus et absconsus
like a husband covered with flesh and hidden,	Processit temporaliter,
taking what he was not,	Sumens illud, quod non erat,
always remaining and preserving	Manens semper perseverat,
what he was eternally.	Quod fuit aeternaliter.[115]

4.4. Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Hymns

Dated between the 12th and 13th centuries, *Hymnus 498. Oratio super Ave maris stella* implores the saving protection of God the Son's virginal mother through these rhymes:

Always make us blameless	*Nos culpis solutos*
and secured,	semper fac et tutos,
imbued with faith and hope,	fide, spe, imbutos,
give us charity,	caritatem da,
you who are not deceived by guilt,	culpis non fraudata,
daughter of the supreme King,	summi regis nata,
immaculate mother	mater illibata,
defend us,	tu pro nobis sta,
free us from sins,	solutos peccatis
you who are beautiful enough,	fac nos pulchra satis,
Trinity's Palace	aula trinitatis
like there is no other greater.	nulla major qua.[116]

4.5. Thirteenth-Century Hymns

From the 13th century, we have documented these two hymns:

Hymnus 151. De beata Maria Virgine compliments the mother of God, exalting her virginal womb with these biblical symbolic figures:

6a. Your belly, oh maiden	6a. Venter tuus, o puella,
Is a conjugal thalamus, a palace,	Thalamus, palatium,
6b. A throne hall, a temple, a cell	6b. Aula, domus, templum, cella
A city, a tabernacle.	Civitas, sacrarium.[117]

Hymnus 358. De S. Maria suggests the human conception of God the Son in the virginal womb of Mary with those lyrical metaphors:

The king enters the palace	Aulam rex ingreditur
From the sacred mansion,	Sacrae mansionis,
The door is firmly closed.	Porta firma clauditur
With the key of Solomon.	Clave Salomonis.[118]

4.6. Fourteenth-Century Hymns

From the 14th century, we have documented these eight hymns:

Hymnus 472. [De gloriosa Virgine Maria] ad nonam requests the Virgin Mary's saving intercession with several metaphors related to grandiose constructions, expressing:

Rejoice, marble temple	Gaude templum marmoreum
and city of the solstice	et civitas solstitii,
crystal castle of the sun	castellum solis vitreum,
who does not know the twilight of the sun:	solis occasus nescii:
make us a temple of chastity	fac nos templum castitatis,
in which the throne of God is present,	in quo sit Dei solium,
turn us into a castle of purity	fac castellum puritatis,
in which the solstice occurs.	in quo fiat solstitium.[119]

Hymnus 469. [De gloriosa Virgine Maria] ad primam applauds Mary as the house of God in these verses:

Rejoice, dawn of the world,	Gaude aurora saeculi,
house of the new dawn,	domus novi diluculi,
from which came the light of light	de qua lux lucis prodiit
and appeared in the world.	et in mundo apparuit.[120]

Hymnus 14. De conceptione BMV. In 2 Nocturno. Responsoria proclaims the virginal divine motherhood of Mary, equated to the abode and temple of God in this stanza:

The House of the chaste breast	Domus pudici pectoris
Is now built as the temple of God,	Templum Dei nunc struitur,
which does not get infected from the outside	Quae nulla labe deforis
not even inside it;	Aut intra se inficitur;
Well, its supreme builder	Nam summus ejus artifex
Does not do anything about it	Nil agit in materia,
Since he is the creator of virtues.	Cum sit virtutum opifex
without having vices.	Non habens in se vitia.[121]

Hymnus 14. De conceptione BMV. In 3 Nocturno. Ad laudes. Antiphonae expresses the virginal divine motherhood of Mary, designating her as the impeccable house of God, in these rhymes:

Holiness agreed	Hanc domum tuam, Domine,
To your house, Lord,	Quae te fovere meruit
Which you deserved to favor	Dierum longitudine,
All along the days,	Hanc sanctitudo decuit,
In the sense that from its origin	Quod ejus ab origine
She was not subjected to any sin.	Nullo peccato subfuit.[122]

Hymnus 69. De beata Maria Virgine proclaims Mary's virginal divine motherhood, calling her the impeccable throne of Wisdom in these stanzas:

6a. Wisdom, which by a septiform gift	6a. Qui per septiforme donum
Made you a throne for herself,	Sibi fecit ex te thronum,
Did not sculpt any	Nullum tale vel tam bonum
equal or as good.	Sculpsit sapientia.
6b. In you the candor of chastity stands,	6b. In te candor castitatis,
In you the brilliance of clarity,	In te fulgor claritatis,
The throne of the supreme majesty	Thronus summae majestatis
Is made of this matter.	Ex hac fit materia.[123]

Hymnus 491. De beata Maria Virgine proclaims the dignity of the Virgin, assimilating her to the throne and palace of God in these verses:

Supreme King's Palace,	Summi regis palatium,
Emperor's Throne,	Thronus imperatoris,
Husband's Kneeler,	Sponsi reclinatorium,
You are the wife of the Creator.	Tu sponsa creatoris".[124]

Hymnus 504. Psalterium Mariae proclaims the Virgin as the sublime seat of the Lord of the universe through these concise rhymes:

Hail, Virgin, high seat	Ave, virgo, summae legis
Of the supreme King of the supreme law,	Sedes alta summi regis,
In which the Governor of the universe	In qua rerum gobernator,
Sits as Emperor of kings.	Regum sedet imperator.[125]

Hymnus 596. Laudes Mariae, from around the 14th century, honors Mary as the impeccable house of God in these short verses:

Beautiful wife,	Sponsa speciosa,
Rose without thorn,	sine spina rosa,
House of the Savior.	domus salvatoris.[126]

4.7. Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Hymns

From some imprecise date between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we have found these two hymns:

Hymnus 52. Salutationes Beatae Mariae Virginis sings the sublimity of the mother of God the Son, whom it designates as the precious receptacle of divine Wisdom, through these rhymes:

Hail, vessel of our salvation.	Salve, nostri vas salutis,
True ark, vessel of virtue,	Arca vere, vas virtutis,
Vessel of heavenly grace;	Vas coelestis gratiae;
Vessel smoothed with the greatest care,	Vas ad unguem levigatum,
Decently crafted vessel	Vas decenter fabricatum
By the hand of Wisdom.	Manu sapientiae.[127]

A few stanzas later *Hymnus 52* develops analogous concepts, assimilating Mary to the house built by wisdom for herself, expressing:

Hail manufactured house	Salve, domus fabrefacta
And decently compacted	Atque decenter compacta
by the hand of Wisdom,	Manu sapientiae,
who built it for herself	Sibi quam aedificavit
And she strengthened it with pillars.	Et columnis roboravit
Of septiform grace.	Septiformis gratiae.[128]

Hymnus 75. In Annuntiatione Beatae Mariae Virginis, it proclaims Mary as the one chosen by divine wisdom to be her property in this stanza:

The Wisdom of God	Te Dei sapientia
Chose you above all others,	Elegit super omnia,
So that you would be her property	Ut esses sibi propria
her wife, her mother and her daughter.	Sponsa, mater et filia.[129]

4.8. Fifteenth-Century Hymns

From the 15th century we have recorded these twenty-four hymns, twelve of which were written by the famous German hymnographer Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach, abbot of Wessobrunn.

Hymnus 369. De Maria matre Domini exalts the mother of God, designating her as the palace of wisdom, in this stanza:

Beautiful palace of the King of heaven	Aula coelestis speciosa regis,
supported with seven columns of Wisdom,	fulta septenis sophiae columnis,
you lock in your belly	Quem nequit totus cohibere mundus
whom the whole world cannot contain.	claudis in alvo.[130]

Hymnus 342. De praesentatione beatae Mariae, ad vesperas. Hymnus proclaims Christ the Savior as the divine wisdom coming from the house of Mary's womb, expressing:

Oh Wisdom of God	O Dei sapientia,
That reachs all things with strength,	attingens cuncta fortiter,
you got up gently	humani lapsus vitia
the vices of fallen man.	sublevasti suaviter.
You assumed the form of a man	Sumpsisti formam hominis,
in which you would accept death	in qua mortem susciperes,
being born from the womb of a virgin	ex alvo nascens virginis,
so as not to be a consort of guilt.	ne consors culpae fieres.[131]

Hymnus 563. Ad beatam Virginem Mariam implores the saving protection of the mother of God, designating her as his palace, in these rhymes:

Oh, you, singular Virgin,	O tu virgo singularis,
Palace of Christ, star of the sea,	aula Christi, stella maris,
That are called Θεοτόκος,	quae Θεοτόκος vocaris,
Take pity on me now.	mihi jam compatiaris.[132]

Hymnus 598. Laudes Mariae Virginis sings the greatness of the Redeemer's caring mother, identifying her as his palace and other symbolic figures, in these verses:

Oh, how holy, how benign	O quam sancta, quam benigna
The mother of the Savior shines	super omnes venerabilis,
Venerable above all!	fulget mater salvatoris!
Virgin worthy of all praise,	laude plena virgo digna,
Noah's ark, Jacob's ladder,	archa Noe, Jacob scala,
Chastity cup,	vasculum pudoris,
Palace of the Redeemer,	aula redemptoris,
Source of all sweetness,	totius fons dulcoris.
Joy of the angels,	angelorum gaudium,
Who breastfeed the Son of God,	lactans Dei filium,
The King of the universe.	regem omnium.[133]

Hymnus 51. De Nominibus Beatae Mariae Virginis exalts the Virgin as the seat of divine wisdom in these rhymes:

Mother of mercy,	Mater misericordiae,
Path and vein of forgiveness,	Via et vena veniae,
Foundation of the Church,	Fundamentum ecclesiae
And seat of Wisdom	Sedesque sapientiae
And form of holiness.	Formaque sanctimoniae.[134]

Hymnus 94. Acrostichon super "Ave Maria" proclaims Mary as the virginal mother of God, calling her the exclusive abode of divine Wisdom, in these verses:

You are the door that closes	Tu es porta, quae clauditur
And doesn't know openings,	Apertionis nescia,
Of which the prophet speaks,	De qua propheta loquitur,
Not passable by any man,	Homini nulli pervia,
By which the Wisdom of God	Qua Dei sapientia
Comes in and goes out,	Ingreditur, egreditur,
Without breaking it when leaving,	Semota violentia
All violence away.	Per egressum non frangit.[135]

Hymnus 108. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem honors the immaculate mother of God, highlighting the fact that she was built by divine Wisdom, stating:

Hail, Fountain of mercy,	Ave, fons clementiae,
fertilized virgin,	Virgo fecundata,
built by order	Summae sapientiae
of the supreme Wisdom,	Nutu fabricata,
root of modesty	Radix pudicitiae
never contaminated,	Nunquam inquinata,
rejoice, blessed Queen	Gaude, plena gratiae
full of grace.	Regina beata.[136]

In almost the same terms as the latter hymn, *Hymnus 109. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem* expresses these concepts:

Hail, light of grace,	Ave, lumen gratiae,
fertilized virgin	Virgo fecundata,
Built by order	Summae sapientiae
of the supreme Wisdom,	Nutu fabricata,
root of Wisdom	Radix sapientiae
never contaminated,	Nunquam inquinata,
blessed Queen	Fons misericordiae,
source of mercy.	Regina beata.[137]

Hymnus 110. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem refers to the Virgin Mother of God through various metaphors alluding to abodes and containers, indicating:

Mansion of the Father's Word,	Verbi Patris atrium,
Beautiful vase provided	Vas provisum carum,
[Holy] Spirit's Palace,	Pneumatis palatium,
simple triclinium	Trium personarum
Of the three [divine] Persons.	Simplex hoc triclinium.[138]

Hymnus 140. De beata Maria Virgine implores the protection of Mary, recognizing her as the mother of divine Wisdom, in these terms:

4a. Hail, Virgin, Star of the sea,	4a. Ave virgo stella maris,
Mother of Wisdom,	Mater sapientiae,
4b. Hear, singular Virgin,	4b. Audi, virgo singularis.
Our prayers today.	Preces nostras hodie.[139]

Hymnus 113. De Beata Maria Virgine greets the patron mother of the Savior with several metaphorical figures, including the seat of Wisdom, through these rhymes:

Hail, vessel of clemency,	Ave, vas clementiae,
Deposit of grace,	Gratiae piscina,
Harbor of true indulgence	Verae indulgentiae
Medicine.	Portus, medicina,
Root of innocence,	Radix innocentiae,
Morning Star,	Stella matutina,
Seat of Wisdom,	Sedes sapientiae,
Queen of Heaven.	Coelica regina.[140]

Hymnus 78. De beata Maria Virgine glorifies Mary as the beneficent mother of divine Wisdom in these stanzas:

2a. Hail, healthy salvation,	2a. Salve, salus salutaris,
With a greeting you are pregnant	Salutando gravidaris
By the Word of Wisdom.	Verbo sapientiae,
2b. Hail, the only one who stops the Sun,	2b. Salve, sola solem paris,
And in childbirth you are not deflowered	Nec in partu defloraris
in the flower of virginity.	Flore pudicitiae.[141]

The German hymnographer Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach, abbot of Wessobrunn from 1438 until 1443, presents these twelve brilliant hymns on the topic at hand:

In *Hymnus 21, "O pulcherrima mulierum"* he celebrates the Virgin Mary for the sublimity of her virtues, designating her with several poetic figures, among them the house of Wisdom, by pointing out:

3. Hail, source of joy,	3. Ave, fons laetitiae,
Flower of virginity,	Flos virginitatis,
Fountain of mercy,	Fons misericordiae,
Light of truth,	Lumen veritatis,
House of Wisdom,	Domus sapientiae,
Seat of honesty,	Sedes honestatis,
Port of indulgence,	Portus indulgentiae,
Form of holiness.	Forma sanctitatis.
4. Hail, light of grace,	4. Ave, lumen gratiae,
Very pleasing to God,	Deo valde grata,
Built by order	Summae sapientiae
Of the supreme Wisdom,	Nutu fabricata,
Root of chastity,	Radix pudicitiae
Never contaminated,	Nunquam inquinata,
Help [us] prepared	Humanae miseriae
For human misery.	Succurre parata.[142]

Several stanzas later in this *Hymnus 21. "O pulcherrima mulierum"* the poet develops similar concepts in these rhymes:

Hail, flower of cleansing,	Ave, flos munditiae,
Clean from frost,	Mundus a pruina,
temperance myrtle,	Myrthus temperantiae,
Medicine of the sick,	Aegri medicina,
With the gift of Wisdom	Dono sapientiae
Give the medicine	Menti meae sauciae
To my wounded mind.	Medelam propina.[143]

In *Hymnus 24. Centinomium Beatae Virginis. Primae partis. In Caput quartum*, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach praises the Virgin as the incomparable house of gold prepared by the Creator, formulating:

O house of gold	O domus aurea,
that the heavenly painter	quam pictor coelitus
Painted subtly	Cunctis subtiliter
With all the virtues,	pinxit virtutibus,
So that in the world	Ut nec in angelis
There is no one similar to you	nec in hominibus
Not even among the angels	Tibi sit similis
nor among men.	in mundi partibus.[144]

A few stanzas later in the fourth chapter of the first part of this *Centinomium Beatae Virginis*, the Wessobrunn hymnographer asks for the saving protection of the mother of divine wisdom in this stanza:

You are the vessel of honor	Tu vas honoris es
And Wisdom,	ac sapientiae,
Honor and rule	Decus et regula
Of all justice,	omnis justitiae,
Repair me with mercy,	Me irae vasculum
By the gifts of grace, to me,	et contumeliae
who am a vessel of wrath	Clementer repara
And outrage.	per dona gratiae.[145]

Then, in the fifth chapter of the first part of this *Centinomium Beatae Virginis*, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach requests the protective aid of the mother of divine wisdom in this stanza:

Oh, land watered	O terra pluviis
By the showers of grace,	compluta gratiae,
from which the flower of Wisdom,	Ex qua ortus est
was born,	flos sapientiae,
Grant that for her virtues	Cujus virtutibus
Of fragrancy	da odorantiae,
I would head innocently	Insonter semitas
To the paths of justice.	pergam justitiae.[146]

Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach, in section I of the first part for Matins of *Hymnus 25. Laudatorium Beatae Mariae Virginis*, requests the saving patronage of Mary, whom he designates with lyrical metaphors, among them the house of the divine Trinity, by expressing:

Hail, oh fig tree	Ave, o ficulnea
That points out the summer,	Signum dans aestatis,
When you circle God the Father's Word	Cum circumdas trabea
With the purple mantle of flesh,	Carnis verbum patris,
Oh ivory house	O domus eburnea
Of the holy Trinity,	Sanctae trinitatis,
Take me to the celestial spring	Ad verna aetherea
With the blessed.	Duc me cum beatis.[147]

In section III of this first part for Matins of this *Laudatorium Beatae Mariae Virginis*, the hymnographer of Wessobrunn congratulates the merciful mother of divine Wisdom in these elaborate rhymes:

	Gaude, quae laetitiam
Rejoice, you who became	Angelis fecisti,
The joy of angels	Quando sapientiam
When you begot	Dei genuisti,
To the Wisdom of God,	Peccatori veniam,
So you paid back	Consolamen tristi,
Forgiveness for the sinner,	Trinitati gloriam
Consolation for the sad,	tunc retribuisti.
Glory to the Trinity.	[. . .]
[. . .]	Gaude, sapientiae
Rejoice, pious mother	Dei pia nutrix,
Of the Wisdom of God	Ac coelestis gratiae
And abundant dispenser	Larga distributrix,
Of heavenly grace,	Sanctae sis ecclesiae
Help the holy Church	In cunctis adjutrix,
In everything,	Meaeque miseriae
and resolve	Totius solutrix.[148]
All my miseries.	

In the fourth part for Tertias of this *Laudatorium Beatae Mariae Virginis*, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach requests the help of the Virgin, whom he recognizes as filled with divine wisdom in these verses:

Hail, vessel of mercy,	Ave, vas clementiae,
Hail, mother of dew,	Ave mater roris,
Full of Wisdom	Plena sapientiae
And of the love of God,	Deique amoris,
Take away from me the virus	Auferas malitiae
Of malice and malevolence,	Virus et livoris,
Constricting us with ties	Verae amicitiae
Of true friendship.	Nos constringens loris.[149]

In the sixth part of that extensive *Laudatorium Beatae Mariae Virginis*, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach asks for the saving protection of Mary, designating her as the house of wisdom and grace, expressing:

Rejoice, house of grace	Gaude, domus gratiae
And of satiety,	Ac satietatis,
House of Wisdom	Domus sapientiae
And kindness,	Ac benignitatis,
Give to the troubled	Filiis ecclesiae
children of the Church	Modo tribulatis
the gift of joy	Donum des laetitiae
and prosperity.	Et prosperitatis.[150]

In *Hymnus 42. Abecedarius 2*, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach invokes the regenerating protection of Mary, whom he designates as the seat of wisdom in this stanza:

Sapphire seat	Summae sapientiae
Of the supreme Wisdom,	Sedes saphyrina,
So that she resides in it	Tempore infantiae
During her childhood	Ut in officina
Like in her factory,	Qua resedit, gratiae
Join us to grace	Suae nos combina,
[we are] Stained with scab	Sordidatos scabie
or the dregs of guilt.	Culpae vel sentina.[151]

In *Hymnus 48. Rosarium I*, IV, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach demands the redemptive intercession of the Virgin, whom he calls the mother of divine wisdom in this stanza:

Hail, Virgin, Gate of Heaven,	Ave, virgo, coeli porta,
Gate of Wisdom,	Porta Sapientiae,
through which salvation came	Per quam salus est exorta
For the children of the Church,	Filiis ecclesiae,
Grant the gift of forgiveness	Te laudantibus reporta
To those who praise you.	Donum indulgentiae.[152]

In the third block of *Hymnus 50. Rosarium III*, III, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach requests the help of Mary, whom he recognizes as the mother of Wisdom, by stating:

Hear us, those of us who hail you with joy:	Audi nos clamantes laete:
The Supreme Wisdom	Nata est clementer de te
Was born of you mercifully.	Summa sapientia.
Grant us to live	Da, vivamus in quiete
Quietly and in the homeland.	Modo et in patria.[153]

In the fourth block of this *Rosarium III*, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach praises Mary for being the virginal mother of wisdom, by proclaiming:

Well!, mother of Jesus Christ,	Euge, mater Jesu Christi,
Mother, I say, of grace	Mater inquam gratiae,
Since you conceived virginally	Namque caste concepisti
To the fountain of Wisdom,	Fontem sapientiae,
And yet you remained a virgin	Tamen virgo permansisti
Lacking the corruption of the flesh.	Carnis carens carie.[154]

In *Hymnus 52. Rosarium 2*, I Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach extols Mary for being the spotless house built by wisdom for herself in these rhymes:

The Wisdom, which preserved you	Qui ab injustitia
Of Adam's injustice	Adae te servavit
And sanctified you that way	Et ita in gratia
In grace,	te sanctificavit.
Prepared for herself	Domum sapientia
A house,	sibi se paravit,
that lived	Sua in infantia
In her childhood [during her pregnancy].	quam inhabitavit.[155]

Finally, in *Hymnus 14. Super Ave Maria*, Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach glorifies Mary because her womb was the throne on which the new wise Solomon (Christ) sat in these verses:

The ivory throne of the womb,	Ventris thronus eburneus,
Ornamented with these [precious] stones,	Ornatus his lapidibus
Became the seat of Solomon,	Fit Salomonis sessio,
Who he is the true peaceful	Qui est verus pacificus
And also magnificent God,	Nec non Deus magnificus,
And [became] the return of the fugitive.	Ac profugi regressio.[156]

At the conclusion of this partial exploration of the texts of the Church Fathers, theologians, and medieval liturgical hymnographers, one remark emerges: all these authors interpreted the biblical metaphor "Wisdom has built her house" through the Mariological and/or Christological meanings already explained about God the Son's human conception/incarnation in Mary's virginal womb. That is why this biblical metaphor and its patristic, theological, and liturgical interpretations acquire an undeniable essentiality in Christian doctrine. Therefore, it is strange that almost no modern author of Mariology books (De Fiores 1992; Forte 1993; Bastero de Eleizalde 1995; de La Potterie 1995; Fernández 1999; Stock 1999; Ponce Cuéllar 2001; Pozo 2005; Cerbelaud 2005; de La Soujeole 2007; Scheffczyk 2010; Calero de los Ríos 2010; Casás Otero 2015; García Paredes 2015; Bonarrigo 2018; Hauke 2021) mentions—fewer explain—this crucial topic. The only one who extensively echoes this Marian symbol is Ángel Castaño Félix (2019), with his homonymous monograph *María "Sedes Sapientiae". Mariología*.

5. The *domus Sapientiae* in Some Images of the Annunciation from the Fifteenth Century

We have confirmed the unanimity with which Eastern and Western Fathers, theologians, and liturgical hymnographers interpreted for more than a millennium the *Proverbs* sentence "Wisdom has built her house" with Mariological and/or Christological projection. According to them, this house built by divine wisdom is the womb of Mary that God the Son chose to be conceived and reside there during the nine months of gestation, or, alternatively, it is the human body (or nature) of Christ in which God the Son "housed" (substantially united) his divine nature.

Now, the Annunciation of the angel to Mary is the event in which God the Son's human conception/incarnation takes place at the very moment in which the Virgin unconditionally accepts God the Father's plan to make her the virginal mother of his divine Son. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is in images of the Annunciation where the biblical *textual metaphor* "Wisdom has built her house" could be most pertinently *visually metaphorized*. In this sense, among the numerous artistic representations of the Annunciation in which Mary's house is shaped as a palace to symbolize the Mariological and Christological meanings already explained,[157] we have selected the following eight Italian Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation.

Fra Filippo Lippi (1406–1489) in *L'Annunciazione delle Murate*, c. 1443–1450 (Figure 1)[158]—so called because it was painted for the Suore Murate convent in Florence—, depicts the Virgin's abode as a luxurious marble palace of Renaissance style. Inside this royal building, the archangel Gabriel, holding a huge lily stem—whose dogmatic symbolism we have explained elsewhere (Salvador-González 2013, pp. 183–222; 2016a, pp. 117–44)—, kneels before Mary while a second angel stands on the left carrying another lily stem. Standing in front of Gabriel, the Virgin, astonished by the celestial messenger's unexpected arrival, seems to have suddenly risen from the prie-dieu where she was praying with the prayer book open over the armrest. In the upper left corner of the painting, God the Father radiates with his open hands toward the Virgin the fertilizing rays of light, symbolizing of God the Son (Salvador-González 2022, pp. 39–85), carrying in his wake the dove of the Holy Spirit to signify the immediate conception/incarnation of God the Son in Mary's virginal womb. Thus, the divine plan, verbalized by Gabriel through his announcement "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you", becomes real at the very moment that Mary accepts the divine design unconditionally as the humble "slave of the Lord" (*ancilla Domini*). She manifests such acceptance through her submissive gesture of bowing her head and putting her right hand on her chest.

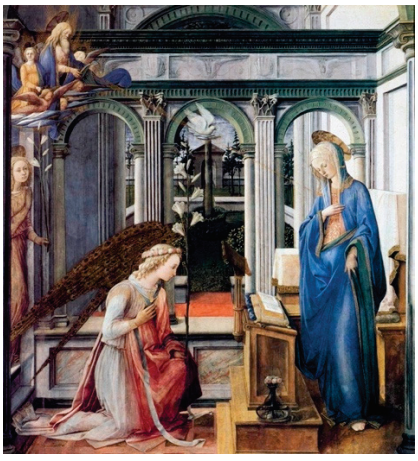

Figure 1. Fra Filippo Lippi, *L'Annunciazione delle Murate*, c. 1443–1450. Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Photo Wikipedia: https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Fra_Filippo_Lippi_014.jpg (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

It is crucial to highlight here that, shaping the ordinary Mary's house in Nazareth into a splendid royal palace, the cult Carmelite friar and priest Fra Filippo Lippi, who undoubtedly knew the exegetical tradition on the matter—ideally symbolizes the Virgin's womb and Christ's human nature (body), according to the double exegetical tradition of Church Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers on the biblical metaphor *domus Sapientiae*.

Fra Carnevale (1420–1484) stages the scene of *The Annunciation*, c. 1445–1450, from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (Figure 2)[159] inside a magnificent Renaissance palace,

splendidly furnished. Genuflecting before Mary, Gabriel points toward her with his right index finger to manifest her election by God the Father to be the mother of God the Son incarnate as a man. Standing in front of a prie-dieu/lectern, the Virgin, keeping open her prayer book, lowers with compliance her head and eyes in a gesture of accepting as a humble "slave of the Lord" the divine plan announced to her by the archangel. Behind Mary, the open door of her bedroom unveils her conjugal bed, whose deep Mariological and Christological meanings we have explained in other studies (Salvador-González 2020, pp. 7–31; 2021, pp. 77–93; 2024).

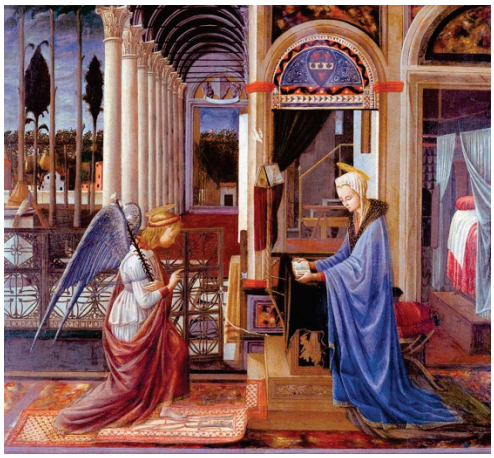

Figure 2. Fra Carnevale, *The Annunciation*, c. 1445–1450. The Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Photo Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_Carnevale_-_The_Annunciation_-_WGA04250.jpg (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

Moreover, it is important to highlight in this painting the Virgin's house shaped as a luxurious royal palace to illustrate the *Proverbs*' statement "Wisdom has built her house". It is important to indicate that Fra Carnevale was a cultured Dominican priest and friar, and by such a status, he knew well all the Mariological and Christological interpretations of the Church Fathers, theologians, and medieval hymnographers about the biblical metaphor *domus Sapientiae*. Therefore, Fra Carnevale wanted to make these dogmatic meanings perceptible in this *Annunciation* from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich by figuring Mary's above as a monumental royal palace.

Francesco del Cossa (1436–1479) presents in this *Annunciation*, 1472, from the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden (Figure 3)[160] another brilliant example of how to illustrate in an image of this Marian episode the proclamation of *Proverbs*, according to which "Wisdom has built her house." That is why the painter places his *Annunciation* in the scenic context of a magnificent palace with monumental architectural elements carved in precious marble. Presiding over the event, God the Father levitates in the sky in the upper left part of the painting while sending the Holy Spirit, depicted as a dove, towards the Virgin. Beginning to kneel in the foreground, the archangel Gabriel raises his right hand in the double gesture of blessing Mary and showing her the heavenly origin of the message he is delivering to her. Standing in a demure attitude, lowering her head and eyes, she seems to show, by placing her right hand on her chest, her willingness to unconditionally accept the Almighty's will.

It is worth noting here that the artist, perhaps instructed by some ecclesiastic fellow, has here represented Mary's humble house in Nazareth as a luxurious palace to illustrate the Mariological and Christological meanings deciphered by the Church Fathers, theologians, and medieval liturgical hymnographers when interpreting the passage from *Proverbs* "Wisdom has built her house."

Figure 3. Francesco del Cossa, *The Annunciation*, 1472. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden. Photo Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francesco_del_Cossa_-_The_Annunciation_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

Gentile Bellini (c. 1429–1507) sets *The Annunciation*, c. 1475, from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid (Figure 4)[161] in the context of a monumental Renaissance palace of polychrome marbles. Beginning to kneel before the Virgin in the adjacent plaza, carrying a stalk of lilies in his left hand, Gabriel raises his right hand in the double gesture of blessing Mary and pointing upward to indicate the origin of the announcement he is communicating to her. Framed by the robust arch in the foreground, Mary prays devoutly on her knees with her hands joined in a room of the palace, at the back of which one can see her bedroom with her immaculate conjugal bed.

Figure 4. Gentile Bellini, *The Annunciation*, c. 1475. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid. Photo Wikipedia: https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Gentile_bellini,_annunciazione.jpg (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

Now, apart from the predictable elements in this Marian episode, it is important to underline here a doctrinal pronouncement: through the *visual metaphor* of this unreal painted palace, with which Gentile Bellini—probably instructed by a priest or friar—transfigured Mary's humble abode in Nazareth to illustrate the *textual metaphors* already explained,

through which the Fathers, theologians, and liturgical hymnographers referred to the Virgin Mary as the "house of Wisdom", where God the Son was conceived and lived during the five months of his gestation.

Carlo Crivelli (c. 1435–c. 1495) plans *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius*, 1486, from the National Gallery in London (Figure 5)[162] —one of the panels of the altarpiece of the main altar of the church of the Santissima Annunziata of the Franciscan convent of the Observant Friars in Ascoli Piceno—through a complex composition with great visual impact.

Figure 5. Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius*, 1486, The National Gallery, London. Photo Wikipedia: https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:The_Annunciation,_with_Saint_Emidius_-_Carlo_Crivelli_-_National_Gallery.jpg (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

We omit here the compositional-narrative details of highly political intention, which allude to the privilege of partial administrative independence granted by Pope Innocent VIII to the city of Ascoli Piceno through the intervention of its bishop. We are interested, on the other hand, in highlighting the spectacular Renaissance palace with which Crivelli—probably instructed by one of the observant friars of the community who commissioned the altarpiece for the main altar of his conventual church—shaped the humble abode of Mary in Nazareth. Through the *visual metaphor* of this dazzling palace, the intellectual author of this *Annunciation* wanted to illustrate the *textual metaphors domus Sapientiae*, *palatium Dei*, or other similar symbolic expressions, interpreted by the Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers according to the Mariological and Christological projections above: first, to symbolize Mary's virginal womb as the supernatural residence that God the Son built to inhabit upon his incarnation; second, to symbolize Christ's human body, generated from Mary, in which God the Son united his divine nature with his human nature.

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510) structures his *Annunciation*, c. 1490, from the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow (Figure 6),[163] in a splendid fashion, placing the Marian episode inside a colossal Renaissance palace. On the left side, framed by a vaulted gallery and a porticoed courtyard, the archangel Gabriel completes his flight, holding a lily stem in his left hand while blessing the Virgin with his right. Inside the room on the right side, Mary stands, bowing her torso and lowering her head and eyes as a sign of respectful obedience to the divine plan announced to her by Gabriel. Crossing the opening on the left, the beam of rays (God the Son) reaches the head/ear of the Virgin as a sign of her immediate supernatural impregnation, according to the outstanding thesis of the *conceptio per aurem* (Salvador-González 2016b, pp. 83–122), after unrestrictedly accepting the will of God the Father as the modest *ancilla Domini*. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to highlight in this *Annunciation* from Glasgow the colossal palace through which Botticelli shapes the ordinary house of Mary in Nazareth. It seems that the painter—induced likely by

an ecclesiastical mentor—wants to illustrate through this monumental royal construction the Christological and Mariological meanings explained by the Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers when interpreting the biblical metaphor *domus Sapientiae*.

Figure 6. Sandro Botticelli, *The Annunciation*, c. 1490. Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow. Photo Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_(Botticelli,_Glasgow)#/media/File:AnnunciazioneBotticelli-1490.jpg) (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

Pietro del Donzello (1452–1509) sets *The Annunciation*, 1498, from the Basilica di Santo Spirito in Florence (Figure 7)[164] in a monumental Renaissance palace with wide vaulted galleries, one of which opens onto a landscape of distant mountains. The dialogue between the two protagonists of the event takes place in one of the wings of the portico that surrounds the vast internal patio of the palace complex. With his hands crossed on his chest, the archangel Gabriel begins to kneel respectfully before the demure Virgin, while she interrupts her reading/prayer of the book she holds in her left hand, while raising her right hand as if she wanted to express her full consent to God the Father's design transmitted to her by the celestial messenger. Between both interlocutors, a symbolic vase with iris flowers stands out in the foreground and in the center of the compositional axis.

Figure 7. Pietro del Donzello, *The Annunciation*, 1498, Basilica di Santo Spirito, Florence. Photo Basilica Santo Sìrito, Firenze: https://www.basilicasantospirito.it/la-basilica/pietro-del-donzello-annunciazione/ (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

Now, apart from these predictable details in the Renaissance images of the Annunciation, it is important to highlight here the representation of Mary's house in Nazareth as a monumental palace. It is assumed that Pietro del Donzello, perhaps instructed by a clergyman, wanted to illustrate with this outstanding palatial building the Mariological and Christological interpretations brought to light by the Fathers, theologians, and medieval liturgical hymnographers on the *Proverbs* saying "Wisdom has built her house."

Bernardino di Betto di Biagio, better known by his pseudonym Pinturicchio (1454–1513), depicts his *Annunciation*, 1501, of the Cappella Baglioni in the Collegiata di Santa Maria Maggiore in Spello (Figure 8),[165] in the context of a colossal Renaissance palace, structured by large arched galleries supported by pilasters richly decorated with friezes and *candelieri*. The main room where the Virgin and Gabriel dialogue connects with a central gallery widely open to a beautiful landscape of gardens, mountains, and villages. Inside this monumental palatial space, the archangel kneels respectfully before Mary, blessing her with his right hand while holding a lily stem in her left hand. Interrupting her prayer before the open book placed over a massive lectern, the Virgin extends her hands and lowers her head and eyes in a humble gesture to indicate her unrestricted obedience to the plan of the most high of electing her as the virginal mother of God the Son incarnate. Therefore, in the upper left side of the painting, God the Father, encircled by a mandorla of cherubs, blesses Mary while sending to her right ear the beam of rays (a symbol of God the Son) with the Holy Spirit shaped as a dove flying in its wake.

Figure 8. Pinturicchio, *The Annunciation*, 1501. Cappella Baglioni, Collegiata di Santa Maria Maggiore, Spello. Photo Web Gallery of Art: https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer_m/z.html (accessed on 20 February 2025). Public domain.

It seems evident that Pinturicchio—perhaps influenced by some cleric—wanted to represent in this *Annunciation* of Spello the humble abode of Mary in Nazareth in the form of a huge palace to symbolically illustrate the meanings of the *domus Sapientiae* metaphor as they were explained for more than a millennium by the Fathers, theologians, and medieval liturgical hymnographers.

6. Conclusions

As a final point of this article, we can compile these essential results:

(1) For more than a millennium (third-thirteenth centuries), all the Fathers, theologians, and medieval liturgical hymnographers of the Greek-Eastern and Latin Churches analyzed here manifest a substantial exegetical agreement on the metaphor *domus Sapientiae* and other similar analogies, such as *templum Dei*, *aula regalis*, *domicilium Trinitatis*, or *thronus deitatis*.

(2) All those masters of Christian doctrine interpret these metaphors in a Mariological or Christological sense separately, or, as some do, in both simultaneously. In its Mariological projection, many interpret the "house of Wisdom" and other analogous symbolic figures as the virginal womb of Mary in which God the Son was supernaturally incarnated as a man, uniting his divine nature with his human nature, and where he resided during

the nine months of pregnancy. Others interpret the *domus sapientiae* and other similar metaphors as the body that God the Son built for himself in the virginal womb of Mary to hypostatically unite his divine nature with his human nature. Some simultaneously defend both Mariological and Christological projections as essentially intertwined.

(3) In any case, for more than a millennium, all the Fathers, theologians, and medieval liturgical hymnographers studied here interpret these metaphors as symbolic expressions of two complementary dogmas: God the Son's supernatural human conception/incarnation in Mary's virginal womb and, as a necessary consequence, Mary's virginal divine motherhood.

(4) Given this ancient patristic, theological, and liturgical tradition on the subject under study, it was not surprising that some artistic images of the Annunciation, the crucial event in which God the Son's human conception/incarnation in Mary's virginal womb took place, could visually illustrate these textual metaphors and their dogmatic meanings. This is illustrated by the eight Renaissance pictorial *Annunciations* that we have analyzed in this article, in which the humble home of Mary in Nazareth is shaped as a monumental, splendid palace.

(5) Now, there is no reason to think that all the material authors of those eight paintings perfectly knew the doctrinal meanings of the house/palace they were depicting: the painter was required to know how to paint, without necessarily being an expert in theological subtleties. It is evident that Fra Filippo Lippi and Fra Carnevale, due to their status as priests and friars, knew in-depth the dogmatic contents of the *domus Sapientiae* doctrine, by which they were fully aware of what they were trying to signify when painting the house/palace in their respective *Annunciations*. Regarding the other six painters studied here, two hypotheses could explain their position: as the best alternative, they could have received from some ecclesiastic or theological expert the necessary instructions to represent Mary's home in Nazareth as a luxurious palace; as a second hypothesis, we can conjecture that some painter simply just "copied" (paraphrasing it) the model of an *Annunciation* with a house/palace painted by a prestigious artist.

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Notes

1 This article is a part of the doctoral thesis for the "Compendium of Publications" modality in the International Doctorate in History, Culture and Thought at the University of Alcalá de Henares.
2 Hippolytus Portuensis, *Pars I. Exegetica. Fragmenta in Proverbia*. PG 10, 626.
3 Origen, *In Exodum Homilia VI*. PG 12, 340.
4 Gregorius Thaumaturgus, *Homilia III. In Annunciatione sanctae Virginis Mariae*. PG 10, 1171.
5 Ibid., 1178.
6 Efremus, *Hymni de Nativitate* 17, 5.
7 Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Christi Resurrectionem Oratio Prima*. PG 46, 615.
8 Gregorius Nyssenus, *Contra Eunomium*, 3, 44. PG 45, 579.
9 Ibid.
10 Cyrillus Alexandrinus, *In Joannis Evangelium. Liber IV. Caput III*. PG 73, 586–587.
11 Cyrillus Alexandrinus, *Commentarius in S. Joannis Evangelium. Liber Quartus. Caput IV*, 3. PG 73, 615.
12 Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio VI. Laudatio sanctae Dei genitricis Mariae*. PG 65, 758.
13 Hesychius Hierosolymitanus, *Sermo V. De sancta Maria Deipara Homilia*. PG 93, 1462.
14 Theodotus Ancyranus. *Homilia VI in S. Deiparam et nativitatem Domini*. PG 77, 1429.
15 Jacopus Sarugensis, *Homilia de Mariae visitatione*. In Álvarez Campos, 1981, vol. V, 54.
16 Jacopus Sarugensis, *Homilia de beata Virgine Matre Dei Maria*. In Álvarez Campos, 1981, vol. V, 11.

17 Procopius Gazensis, *In Exodum* 25, 26, 1. PG 87-1, 645–646.
18 Joannes Maxentius Antiochenus, *Adunationis Verbi Dei ad propriam carnem.* PG 86-1, 89–90.
19 Ibid., 91–92.
20 Leontius Byzantinus, *Adversus Nestorianos. Liber IV*, 9. PG 86-1, 1670.
21 Ibid
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 1670–1671.
27 Modestus Hierosolymitanus, *Encomium in Dormitionem SanctissimaeDominae Nostrae Deiparae semperque Virginis Mariae*. PG 86-2, 3285.
28 Germanus Constantinopolitanus, *In Praesentationem SS. Deiparae. Sermo I.* PG 98, 306.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 307.
31 Ibid., 346.
32 Germanus Constantinopolitanus, *Hymnus in Sanctam Dei Genitricem*. PG 98, 454.
33 Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio IV. In sanctam Nativitatem praesanctae Dominae nostrae Dei Genitricis, semperque virginis Mariae*. PG 97, 867–870.
34 Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio V. In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae nostrae Annuntiationem*. PG 97, 894–895.
35 Iohannes Damascenus, *Homilia I In Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*, 9. PG 96, 675.
36 Ibid., 679.
37 Iohannes Damascenus, *Homilia II In Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*, 11. PG 96, 690.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 691.
40 Ibid.
41 Joannis Euboeensis, *Sermo in Conceptionem Santae Deiparae.* PG 96, 1487.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 1499.
44 Cosmas de Maiuma (Cosmas Hierosolymitanus), *Hymni. VI. Pro Magna Quinta Feria*. PG 98, 478.
45 Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. I. In pervigilio Nativitatis SS. Deiparae Canon I*. PG 105, 983–986.
46 Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. Theotocia seu Deiparae Strophae.* PG 105, 1258.
47 Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. Theotocia Ex Paracletica Graecorum*. PG 105, 1295.
48 Ibid., 1303.
49 "Ipse ergo Rex Israel transivit hanc portam, ipse dux sedit in ea; quando Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis (Joan. 1, 14), quasi Rex sedens in aula regali uteri virginalis, vel in olla ferventi [. . .]. Utrumque enim diversis in codicibus invenitur. Aula regalis est virgo, quae non est viro subdita, sed Deo soli." (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De institutione virginis*, XII, 79. PL 16, 324).
50 "Quid autem loquar quanta sit virginitatis gratia, quae meruit a Christo elegi, ut esset etiam corporale Dei templum, in qua corporaliter, ut legimus (Coloss. 2, 9) habitavit plenitudo divinitatis? Virgo genuit mundi salutem, virgo peperit vitam universorum". (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, Epistula LXIII, 33. PL 16, 1249–1250).
51 Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Hymnus IV*. PL 16, 1411.
52 Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Hymnus XII*. PL 16, 1412.
53 "Neque enim terrenorum parietum constructiones, et silvestrium ligna culminum desiderabat, quae cum fuissent, manus dirueret hostilis; sed illud templum quaerebat, quod in hominum conderetur mentibus [. . .], in quo habitaret Dominus Jesus, et unde ad redemptionem universorum procederet, ut in utero Virginis sacra reperieretur aula, in qua Rex habitaret coelestium, et corpus humanum Dei templum fieret; quod etiam, cum solutum esset, in triduo resuscitaretur". (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, Epistola XXX, 3. PL 16, 1107).
54 "Dominus enim virtutum ipse est rex gloriae (Ps. 23, 10): ipse descendet in uterum virginalem, et ingredietur et egredietur Orientalem portam, quae semper est clausa (Ezech. 44); de qua Gabriel dicit ad Virginem: Spiritus sanctus veniet super te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi: propterea quod nascetur in te sanctum, vocabitur Filius Dei (Lc. 1, 35). Et in Proverbiis: Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum (Prov. 9, 1)". (Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Isaiam Prophetam. Liber III*. Caput VII, 14. PL 24, 110).
55 "Idoneum plane Maria Christo habitaculum, non pro habitu corporis, sed pro gratia originali. (Maximus Taurinensis, *Homilia V. De eadem [ante natale Domini]*. PL 57, 235).

[56] "Mariae ergo uterum non uterum dixerim fuisse, sed templum; templum plane est, in quo habitat sanctum quidquid in coelo est: nisi quod super coelos aestimandum est, ubi quasi in secretiore tabernáculo mysterium a divinitate disponitur, quemadmodum a pluribus ascendatur ad coelum". (Ibid., 236).

[57] "Ceterum illud inexplicabile est et indicibile, quod est Pater et Filius, Filius Patris, Verbum Patris, virtus et sapientia Patris, in quo et per quem fecit Pater omnia. Hoc Verbum intellige Filium Dei, quem misit pro salute mundi, sicut propheta dixit: *Misit Verbum tuum, et sanavit eos (Psal* CVI)." (Maximus Taurinensis, *Tractatus V. Contra Iudaeos*. PL 57, 805).

[58] "'Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum (Prov. 9, 1)'. . . Hic certe agnoscimus Dei Sapientiam, hoc est, Verbum Patri coaeternum, in utero virginali domum sibi aedificasse corpus humanum, et huic, tamquam capiti membra, Ecclesiam subiunsisse". (Augustinus Hipponensis, *De Civitate Dei. Liber Decimus Septimus*, 20. PL 41, 555).

[59] "'Domine, quis habitabit in tabernaculo tuo, aut quis requiescet in monte sancto tuo? Qui ingreditur sine macula et operatur iustitiam (Ps. 14, 1–2)' [...] Omnis immaculatus ingreditur tabernaculum Domini, et ibi immaculatus efficitur. Jesus autem immaculatus solus virgineam aulam ingressus, ipsam tabernaculum a maculis carnalibus liberavit, et dedit sanctificationem potius quam accepit". (Arnobius Junior, *Commentarii in Psalmos. Psalmus XIV*. PL 53, 340–341).

[60] "Ille qui de limo terrae virginis primum hominem fecit, ipse in utero Virginis sanctae hominem in quo ipse habitaret sua incomprehensibili omnipotentia fabricavit, secundum quod legimus: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov. IX,1)." (Arnobius Junior, *Conflictus de Deo trino et uno. Liber II*. PL 53, 275).

[61] "Ingrediens namque sanctus Spiritus virgineam pudicitiae aulam, talem Christum, hominem factum ex ea fecit procedere, qui Perdita restauraret, et omnium delicta relaxaret, qui innocens innocentem sanguinem suum pro redemptione humanae fragilitatis effunderet, et per hominem visibilem Deus invisibilis unigenitum suum visibilem hominibus praesentaret". (Eleutherius Tornacensis, *Sermo De Incarnatione Domini*. PL 65, 92).

[62] "Neque enim pars ejus remansit in Patre, et pars ejus descendit in Virginem, cum totus in Patre maneret quod erat, et tutus in Virgine fieret quod non erat: totus cum Patre totum implens et continens mundum, totus sibi in utero Virginis aedificans domum (scriptum est enim: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov., IX,1)), totus in Patre sempiterno, totus in homine suscepto, totus in coelo, totus in mundo". (Fulgentius Ruspensis, *Ad Trasimundum. Liber III*. PL 65, 271).

[63] "Sicut enim carnem suam in Virginis útero, faciente Patre, etiam ipse fecit (quia secundum humanam naturam de Christo scriptum est: [. . .] *Quia sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov., IX,1)" (Fulgentius Ruspensis, *Ad Trasimundum. Liber III*. PL 65, 297).

[64] "Nam et ipsum corpus Filii, et domum Scriptura sancta nominavit et templum, cum dicit Salomon: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum (Prov., IX,1;* et evangelista huic sensui concordans ait: *Ipse autem dicebat de templo corporis sui (Joan, II, 21)*" (Fulgentius Ruspensis, *Ad Trasimundum. Liber III*. PL 65, 302).

[65] (Venantius Fortunatus, *Miscellanea. Liber VIII. Caput VII. In laudem sanctae Mariae Virginis et matris Domini*. PL 88, 281).

[66] "Prophetia in Proverbiis in una eademque Christi persona sic declarat utramque naturam: [. . .] divinam secundum illud: *Necdum erant abyssi et ego jam concepta eram*; humanam secundum hoc: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum*, corporis utique sui templum in quo Filius Dei inhabitaret, dum Verbum est caro factum." (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Collectio canonum S. Isidori Hisp. Adscripta*. PL 84, 600).

[67] "Quid sine reverentia occurris [Helvidius]? Quid sine pudore vexaris? Quare virginis nostrae principia corruptionis fine coarctas? Quam ob rem initia pudoris exitu actae procreationis infamas? Cur integritatem divinitate sacram humana conventione deturpas?" (Ildefonsus Toletanus, *Liber de virginitate perpetua S. Mariae adversus tres infideles*, II. PL 96, 61).

[68] "Nolo hujus maiestatis vim irrumpas, ne possessionem Dei convexare ausu temerario pertentes, ne mansionem divinitatis noceas praesumptione contemptionis, ne domum Domini injuriis corruptionis confodias, ne portam domus Dei, ejus exitu clausam, a quocumque posse adiri contendas". (Ibid.).

[69] "Virtutum Deus est Dominus possesionis hujus. Coelorum rex est possessor juris istius. Omnipotens est artifex aedificii hujus. Solus egressor et custos est portae egressionis hujus". (Ibid.).

[70] "Hanc domum ingrediens non pudoris spolia tulit, sed egrediens integritate ditavit." (Ibid.).

[71] Jacques-Paul Migne places this sermon among the dubious works of St. Ildefonsus.

[72] "Bona siquidem domus, charissimi, in qua tota simul divinitas illabitur Verbi, in qua sapientia Dei Patris septem sibi columnas erexit, super quam omnis innititur domus, et fabricatur Ecclesia". (Ildefonsus Toletanus, *Sermo III. De eadem Assumptione beatae Mariae III*. PL 96, 257).

[73] "Et pulchre Saul filius Jemini, id est dexterae meae dicitur, quia ipse sibi Christus ex divinitatis suae potentia condidit hominis substantiam, quam ex virgine nasciturus susciperet; juxta quod alibi legitur: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov. IX)" (Beda Venerabilis, *In Samuelem prophetam allegorica expositio. Liber II*. PL 91, 559).

[74] "Propter namque inviolatam pudoris aulam, virginitatem praedicat et ante partum, et in partu, et post partum: et propter verae nativitatis exortum, verum parientis partum confitetur". (Ratramnus Corbeiensis, *Liber de Nativitate Christi*, 2. PL 121, 84).

[75] "Quid est virgo in partu, ni pariens virgo? Et quid virgo post partum, nisi virgo perseverans post partum?" (Ibid.).

[76] "Et homo est ex substantia matris in saeculo natus, id est totus homo cum corpore et anima, in omnia similis nobis absque peccato (Hebr. IV). Ex substantia matris, id est de aequalitate naturae matris. [. . .] Unde Salomon dicit: Sapientia aedificavit

sibi domum (Prov, IX): hoc est Christus aedificavit sibi Carnem de beata Maria". (San Bruno Herbipolensis, *Commentarium in Orationem Dominicam*. PL 142, 566).

77 "Sicut ergo impossibile erat ut humani generis redemptio fieret, nisi Dei Filius de Virgine nasceretur; ita etiam necessarium fuerat ut Virgo, ex qua Verbum caro fieret, nasceretur. Oportebat quippe prius aedificari domum, in quam descendens coelestis Rex habere dignaretur hospitium. Illam videlicet, de qua per Salomonem dicitur: 'Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum, excidit columnas septem (Prov. 9).' [...] Quam utique aeterna Sapientia, quae attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter (Sap. 8), talem construxit quae digna fieret illum suscipere, et de intemeratae carnis suae visceribus procreare". (Petrus Damianus, *Sermo XLV. II. In Nativitate Beatissimae Virginis Mariae (VIII Sept.)*. PL 144, 741).

78 Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. XLVII. In assumptione ipsius S. Virginis, Hymus ad vísperas*. PL 145, 934–935.

79 Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. LIII. Hymnus ad tertiam*. PL 145, 936.

80 Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. LXI. Rhythmus de S. Maria Virgine*. PL 145, 938.

81 Ibid., 939.

82 "Quam [Mary] utique aeterna Sapientia, quae attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia saviter (Sap. VIII), talem construxit quae digna fieret illum suscipere, et de intemeratae carnis suae visceribus procreare." (Petrus Damianus, *Sermo XLV. In Nativitate Beatissimae Virginis Mariae*. PL 144, 741).

83 "Quam [María] nimirum sibi Sapientia domum aedificavit (Prov. IX), atque in ea per humilitatis assumptae mysterium velut in sacratissimo lectulo requievit." (Petrus Damianus, *Opusculum XXXIII. De bono suffragorum*, Caput IV. PL 145, 566).

84 "Aula universalis propitiationis, causa generalis reconciliationis, vas et templum vitae et salutis universorum, nimium contraho merita tua, cum in me homunculo vili singulariter recenseo beneficia tua, quae mundus amans gaudet, gaudens clamat esse sua". (Anselmus Cantuariensis, Orationes sive Meditationes. 7. Oratio ad Sanctam Mariam pro impetrando eius et Christi amore. In Obras completas de San Anselmo, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1953, vol. 2, 316).

85 "Tu namque Domina admirabilis singulari virginitate, amabilis salutari fecunditate, venerabilis inaestimabili sanctitate, tu ostendisti mundo Dominum suum et Deum suum quem nesciebat, tu visibilem exhibuisti mundo creatorem suum quem prius non videbat, tu genuisti mundo restauratorem quo perditus indigebat, tu peperisti mundo reconciliatorem quem reus non habebat". (Ibid.).

86 "O beata Dei genitrix, virgo Maria, templum Dei vivi, aula Regis aeterni, sacrarium Spiritus sancti". (Anselmus Cantuariensis, *Oratio LV. Ad eamdem Sanctam Virginem Mariam*. PL 158, 961).

87 Anselmus Cantuariensis, *Hymni et Psalterium de Sancta Virgine Maria. Psalterium Dominae nostrae (Pars I)*. PL 158, 1037.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 1040.

90 Ibid.

91 "Noli despicere bonitatem figuli qui te plasmavit et fecit et voluit; ipse est Dei virtus, et Dei sapientia (I Cor. 1) quae in utero Virginis aedificavit sibi domum." (Ivo Carnotensis, *Decreti Pars VI. De clericis*. PL 161, 534).

92 "Etenim Spiritus sanctus domum istam non manufactam templum Dominici corporis, sapienter per semetipsum aedificavit, decenter exornavit, gloriose ac feliciter dedicavit (III Reg. VII,8). Aedificavit, inquam, in ipsa Verbi incarnatione, exornavit in illius veri hominis manifestatione, dedicavit in ejusdem sacrosancta resurrectione." (Rupertus Tuitensis, *De glorificatione Trinitatis et Processione Sancti Spiritus. Liber IX*. PL 169, 181).

93 "quae videlicet domus recte intelligitur fabrica corporis Christi, etenim ipsa est "domus quam sapientia sibi aedificavit (Prov. IX)"," (Rupertus Tuitensis, *Commentaria in duodecim Prophetas Minores. In Joel. Liber I*. PL 168, 254).

94 "Honorabilis et praedicabilis femina, digna Deo virgo Maria domus Domini appellatur, in qua porta orientalis clausa semper esse perhibetur. Recto nomine Maria, domus, id est templum Domini dicitur, quia Deus ipse habitavit in ea, et per sanctificationem Spiritus, et per humanam conceptionem". (Goffridus Vindocinensis, *Sermo IV. In Nativitate Domini IV*. PL 157, 249).

95 "Servata itaque divinae proprietate naturae, in utero virginis factus est caro, et perfectus homo in veritate carnis et animae, et per portam templi quae respicit ad Orientem, quae nec per se patuit, nec ab alio aperta fuit, processit de virgine matre". (Ibid., 250).

96 "Ad hanc beatissimam virginem Deus Pater ex se genitum Filium misit, ut ipse Dei Filius, virginis etiam filius fieret et sponsus". (Goffridus Vindocinensis, *Sermo VIII. In omni festivitate B. Mariae Matris Domini*. PL 157, 267).

97 "Hoc Pater disposuit charitate, Filius voluntate complevit, Spiritus sanctus paravit thalamum et ornavit, id est ab omni corruptione peccati mundavit virginis uterum, et multiplici sanctitate replevit. Ibi tanquam in aula regia Deus qui omnia ante creaverat, seipsum creavit in Maria". (Ibid.).

98 "Vere beneplacitum fuit Deo habitare in te, quando ex ipsa illibata carnis tuae substantia, quasi de lignis Libani, architectura ineffabili, domum sibi aedificavit Dei Sapientia". (Bernardus Claraevallensis, Ad Beatam Virginem deiparam. Sermo panegyricus. PL 184, 1011).

99 "In ipsa [Maria] quippe et ex ipsa, Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum *(Prov.* ix, i), in ipsa et ex ipsa paravit sibi thronum, cum in ea et ex ea corpus aptavit sibi ita ad omnia perfectum et congruum, ut et domus ei sit ad quiescendum, et thronus ad judicandum,

quod primo tabernaculum ei fuit ad pugnandum, et cathedra ad docendum." (Bernardus Claraevallensis, *De Annuntiatione Domini. Sermo I*. PL 185, 117).

100 "Ego quippe sum aeterna Dei sapientia, cui aeterna et paterna ineat omnipotentia cum benignitate, quae Spiritus Dei est. Quocirca templum corporis mei templum totius Trinitatis est in quo templo, *qui videt* me, *vide et Patrem meum (Joan.* xiv, 9), pariterque Spiritum sanctum." (Gerhohi Rheicherspergensis, Commentarium in Psalmos, Pars II. Psal. XXVII. PL 193, 1220–1221).

101 "El licet quodammodo specialiter ego sapientia aedificaverim mihi domum sive templum hoc non manufactum, dum solummodo ego Dei sapientia sim incarnata, non Pater aut Spiritus sanctus: tamen dum mihi aeternae sapientiae consubstalitialis creditur aeterna potentia et aeterna bonitas, id est Pater et Spiritus sanctus, templum corporis mei, quod ego sapientia, ego Verbum, ego Filius inhabito per suscriptionem Incarnationis, Pater quoque ac Spiritus sanctus inhabitant per plenitudinem divinitatis suae". (Ibid.).

102 "Domus corpus Christi designat, sicut Salomon dicit: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov. IX,1. Sapientia quippe sibi domum condidit, cum unigenitus Dei Filius in seipse intra uterum virginis, mediante anima, humanum sibi corpus creavit. Sic namque corpus unigeniti domus Dei dicitur, sicut etiam templum vocatur, ita vero ut unus idemque Dei, atque hominis filius ipse sit qui inhabitat ipse, qui habitatur." (Garnerius Sancti Victoris, *Gregoriana. Liber XIII*. Caput VI. PL 193, 395).

103 "Ecce palatium mirificis impensis constructum, sed et gazis incomparabilibus locupletatum; solique Deo Dei Filio locupletatum". (Petrus Cellensis, *Sermo VI. In Adventu Domini. In eodem tempore VI Adventu*. PL 202, 649–654).

104 "Propter fortitudinem civitas quam fundavit Altissimus; propter virginitatis integritatem hortus conclusus, fons signatus, porta clausa, Libanus non incisus, propter sanctitatem templum Dei, porta sanctuarii, arca Dei, sacrarium Spiritus sancti; propter gloriam aula regis, cella aromatum, fons hortorum, paradisus deliciarum". (Petrus Blesensis, *Sermo XXXVIII. In Nativitate Beatae Mariae*. PL 207, 673).

105 "Haec est sapientia de qua loquimur: haec est sapientia quae aedificavit sibi domum, hic est Christus Dei virtus, et Dei sapientia. Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum, quia Jesus Christus in habitationem uterum Mariae elegit. Haec est domus pudici pectoris. [. . .]: haec est domus Dei et porta coeli". (Ibid.).

106 "Christus autem conceptus est ex Spiritu Sancto et Maria Virgine, venit ad corpus incoinquinatum, in quo *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov. IX)." (Helinandus Frigidi Montis, *Sermo X. In Ramis Palmarum III*. PL 211, 562).

107 "[Maria] ad aeterno praedestinata fuit velut in conjugem patris spirituum, et commune cum illo haberet filium et esset mater Filii Dei, sacrarium Spiritus sancti, templum totius Trinitatis, propria domus sapientiae, sicut scriptum est: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov. IX)." (Helinandus Frigidi Montis, *Sermo XIX. In Assumptione B. Mariae I*. PL 212, 638).

108 "Occurrit enim tota Trinitas, etsi non motu locali, tamen influentia favorabili, laetitia principali et gloria deiformi. Tota siquidem beata Trinitas te cognovit, Maria, sponsam castae dilectionis, aulam sanctae inhabitationis, officinam mirae operationis. Vel distinctive dicamus: Cognovit beatam Mariam Pater domum suae maiestatis". (Bonaventura de Balneoregio, De Assumptione B. Virginis Mariae. Sermo III. In Obras de San Buenaventura, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963), vol. 4, 706–707).

109 *Hymnus 575. De s. Maria. hymni. Ad tertiam*. Mone, 390.

110 *Hymnus 68. In Assumptione BMV.* AHMA 9, 55.

111 *Hymnus 68. In Assumptione BMV.* AHMA 9, 56.

112 *Hymnus 16. In Nativitate BMV. Ad Vesperas*. AHMA 14, 170.

113 *Hymnus 143. De beata Maria V.* AHMA 10, 108.

114 *Hymnus 504. Psalterium Mariae*. Mone, 238.

115 *Hymnus 90. Jubilus de singulis membris BMV.* AHMA 15, 110.

116 *Hymnus 498. Oratio super Ave maris stella*. Mone, 223.

117 *Hymnus 151. De beata Maria V.* AHMA 10, 113.

118 *Hymnus 358. De S. Maria*. Mone, 51.

119 *Hymnus 472. [De gloriosa virgine Maria] ad nonam*. Mone, 187.

120 *Hymnus 469. [De gloriosa Virgine Maria] ad primam*. Mone, 182.

121 *Hymnus 14. De conceptione BMV. In 2 Nocturno. Responsoria.* AHMA 5, 55.

122 *Hymnus 14. De conceptione BMV. In 3 Nocturno. Ad laudes. Antiphonae*. AHMA 5, 56.

123 *Hymnus 69. De beata Maria V*. AHMA 8, 63.

124 *Hymnus 491. De b. Maria v. Mone, 211*. Published also, with the title *Hymnus 91. De Beata Maria V*., en AHMA 9, 74

125 *Hymnus 504. Psalterium Mariae*. Mone, 250.

126 *Hymnus 596. Laudes Mariae*. Mone, 409.

127 *Hymnus 52. Salutationes BMV.* AHMA 15, 69.

128 *Hymnus 52. Salutationes BMV.* AHMA 15, 72.

129 *Hymnus 75. In Annuntiatione BMV*. AHMA 15, 101.

130 *Hymnus 369. De Maria matre domini*. Mone, 62.

131 *Hymnus 342. De praesentatione b. Mariae, ad vesp. hymnus*. Mone, 30.

132 *Hymnus 563. Ad b. virg. Mariam*. Mone, 371.
133 *Hymnus 598. Laudes Mariae v*. Mone, 410.
134 *Hymnus 51. De Nominibus BMV.* AHMA 15, 65.
135 *Hymnus 94. Acrostichon super "Ave Maria".* AHMA 15, 122.
136 *Hymnus 108. Ad B. Mariam V.* AHMA 15, 134.
137 *Hymnus 109. Ad B. Mariam V.* AHMA 15, 135.
138 *Hymnus 110. Ad B. Mariam V.* AHMA 15, 136.
139 *Hymnus 140. De beata Maria V.* AHMA 10, 107.
140 *Hymnus 113. De B. Maria V.* AHMA 15, 139.
141 *Hymnus 78. De beata Maria V.* AHMA 8, 68. Published also, with the title *Hymnus 141. De beata Maria V.*, in AHMA 10, 107.
142 *Udalricus Wessofontanus, Hymnus 21. "O pulcherrima mulierum".* AHMA 6, 60. Published also, with the title *Hymnus 512. De beata virgine*, in Mone, 291.
143 Udalricus Wessofontanus, *Hymnus 21. "O pulcherrima mulierum".* AHMA 6, 61.
144 Udalricus Wessofontanus, *Hymnus 24. Centinomium Beatae Virginis. Primae partis. Caput quartum*. AHMA 6, 74.
145 Udalricus Wessofontanus, *Hymnus 24. Centinomium Beatae Virginis. Primae partis. Caput quartum*. AHMA 6, 75.
146 Udalricus Wessofontanus, *Hymnus 24. Centinomium Beatae Virginis. Primae partis. Capitulum quintum.* AHMA 6, 83.
147 Udalricus Wessofontanus, *Hymnus 25. Laudatorium B.V.M. Prima Pars. Ad Matutinum*. I. AHMA 6, 88.
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154 Udalricus Wessofontanus, *Hymnus 50. Rosarium III*. IV. AHMA 6, 162.
155 Udalricus Wessofontanus, *Hymnus 52. Rosarium 2*. I. AHMA 6, 168.
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